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DECEMBER 1990
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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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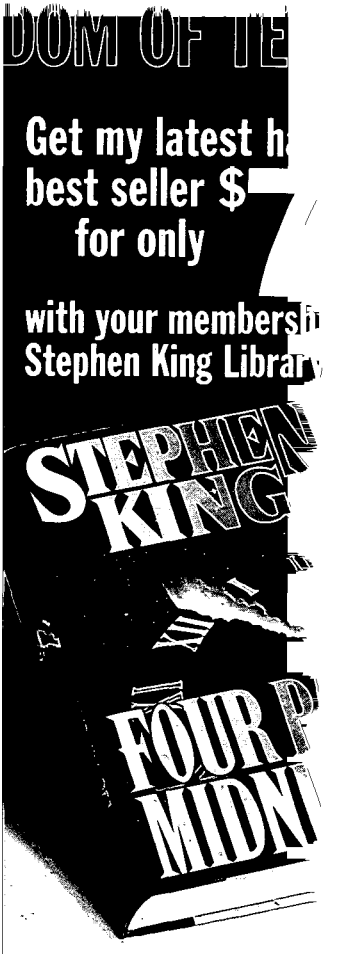

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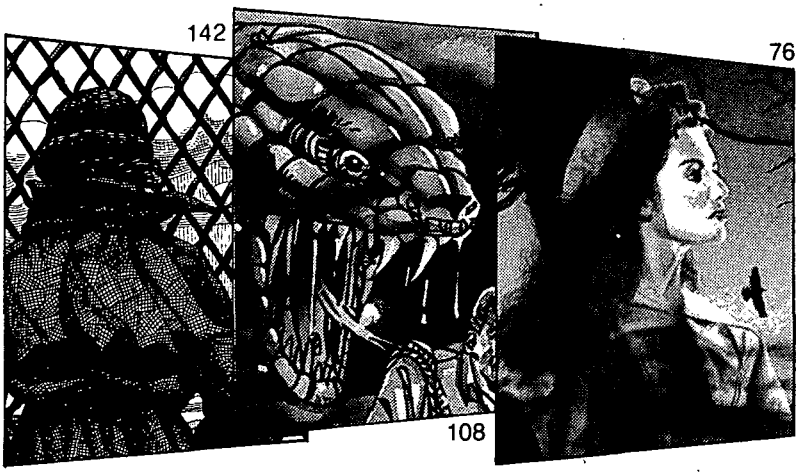

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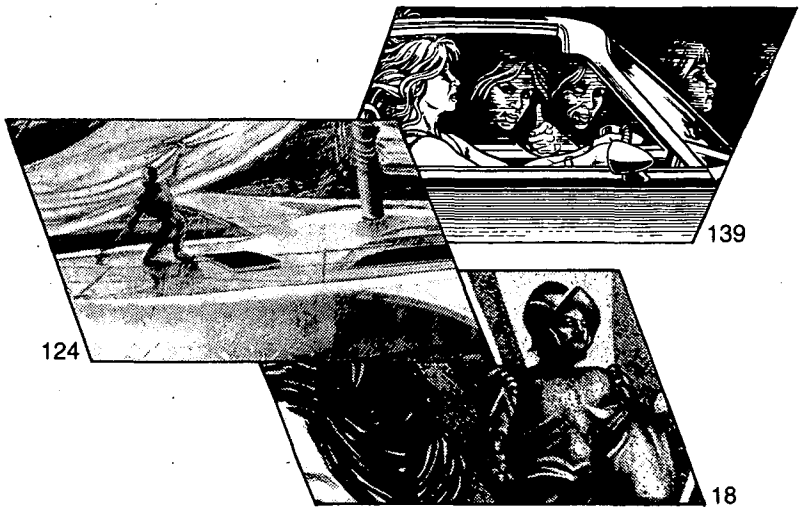

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Cover art by Michael Whelan

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Published every 28 days with special issues in April and November by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.50 per copy ($2.95 per copy in Canada). One year subscription $34.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $39.65, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. For back issues send $3.50 to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., *380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered* trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1990 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10168-0035. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3E1. ISSN 0162-2188.

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EDITORIAL
IMAGINATION

by Isaac Asimov

Every once in a while a letter comes in that berates me for making a statement such as "To travel faster than the speed of light is impossible."

The letter might say, "Never say impossible. For something to be impossible is itself impossible. What human beings can imagine human beings can do."

Doesn't that sound great? Isn't that filled with the spirit of indomitability?

No, it doesn't and it isn't. It's just silly. I can easily imagine myself to be floating in air, powered by nothing but my will. Anyone want to bet that I can do it, simply because I imagine it? I can easily imagine that I will live forever. But imagining will never make that possible.

Of course, the answer to that is that imagination will not necessarily come true right here and right now and right to some definite individual. It will come true some day through some new discovery to humanity generally.

Perhaps, but some things that can easily be imagined are not likely ever to come true under any conditions.

The laws of nature are sets of limitations. The law of conservation of energy tells us that no matter what we do, we cannot make energy out of nothing, or destroy energy either. The second law of thermodynamics tells us we can't reduce the entropy of a closed system. The uncertainty principle tells us there are some combinations of measurements we cannot make. Quantum theory tells us we cannot predict the behavior of a single electron. Relativity tells us we cannot go faster than light.

As nearly as we can tell, the universe works and makes sense only within those limitations. We can sometimes prove the non-existence of such a limitation, as when we found that the law of conservation of parity is not always necessarily observed, but only at the price of having to set up a more general law and a more general limitation.

A universe without such limitations is unthinkable, and even undesirable.

Let us make this clear by considering a much smaller universe, that of the chessboard. Playing chess is a litany of limitations. No

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one can move twice in a row. The bishop can only move diagonally, the rook only orthogonally, the pawn only forward, but only diagonally when it takes another chessman, and so on.

What, then, if two players sit down for a snappy game of chess and one of them says, "Nothing is impossible. What we can imagine we can do. We move when we want to and in any direction we want to."

In that case, there is no game. Chess becomes impossible and meaningless.

Well, the universe is an enormously grand and complex chess game and the human brain is playing that game, and from its progress it is trying to understand the universe. Without the limitations of the laws of nature, however, there is no game and there can never be an understanding. Of course, we have to make sure we know what the laws of nature are, and must sometimes have to modify that understanding, but that doesn't affect the general situation.

And yet we violate these limitations in science fiction freely. I routinely have faster-than-light travel in my novels. I violate the law of conservation of energy in *The Gods Themselves*. I make use of anti-gravity in *Foundation's Edge*, though I'm pretty sure there's no such thing. And, of course, I use miniaturization in *Fantastic Voyage II* and in my recent short story "Too Bad!" though I'm certain that is impossible, also.

Why do I do it? In order to tell

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a story and have my plot work out. In "Too Bad!", for instance, miniaturization is merely a device to show that to a dedicated scientist the product of his thinking may be more important to him than his life.

But in that case, what do I say to people who write in and object to any suggestion that a science fiction writer ought to know science? After all, they say, "This is a magazine of science *fiction*," as though that means (again) that it doesn't have to play by the rules.

Look, there is fiction and there is fiction.

Let me give you an example. A young boy is coming home from school and pauses to play with other kids, or to smoke cigarettes behind the barn, or to do any other petty illicit thing, and he comes home late, and a frowning father demands an explanation.

"Well," says the kid, thinking quickly, "I was coming home as fast as I could, when at the corner of Elm and Broad, two cars nearly hit each other and the guys in the cars got out and yelled and argued and started a fight and the police came, and I was sort of watching and didn't notice the time."

He might well get away with that.

But suppose the kid says, "I was coming home as fast as I could, when at the corner of Elm and Broad, I met a large fire-breathing purple dragon with yellow spots—" He will certainly never get to finish the story because his father will, at that point, grab his ear and drag him into the house for punishment.

Now what is the difference between those two cases? Both kids were telling lies. Both were making up a piece of fiction, yet one makes his lie effective and one does not. The difference is that the first lie was *plausible* and the second one was not. Plausibility, not necessarily scientific accuracy, is the key to successful science fiction.

When I make use of faster-than-light travel, or miniaturization, or anything else that is impossible, I go to a great deal of trouble to make it plausible by surrounding it with subsidiary detail that makes it all sound sensible. In order to do that, one must understand science, and there's no way of getting round that.

For instance, you can violate the law of conservation of energy by rubbing a lamp and having a genie build a castle for you in the wink of an eye. That sounds good, but it's fantasy. On the other hand, you can violate the law of conservation of energy as I did, by talking about multiple universes with different sets of laws of nature. If you do that well, that's science fiction.

What's more, something being "fiction" is no excuse for its being flat wrong.

It is common in old two-bit Westerns to have the hero fire his gun thirty-seven times without reloading. The kids who watch don't care and don't mind. It's only Western *fiction*. I sit there, however, and count the shots with gathering con-

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tempt. Or else our hero drops over a cliff and zooms down forty feet, landing astride his horse which promptly runs off and rescues him from his pursuers. Except that I sit there and wonder why he didn't break the horse's back when he landed or, even worse, why he didn't destroy some valuable genetic equipment of his own.

In *Julius Caesar,* William Shakespeare has Brutus hear the striking of a clock, although clocks that struck the hour were not developed for nearly a thousand years after the time of Brutus. He has Richard III (while still only the Duke of Gloucester) refer to the "murderous Machiavell," though Machiavelli was only a teen-ager at the time and had not yet written the books that were to make him famous.

We forgive Shakespeare these lapses, because he was Shakespeare, but if a modern writer of historical romances were to make mistakes such as these, we would not be ready to say, "Oh, well, it's only historical *fiction.*" No, we are much more likely to think that the book was not well-researched, and, unless it was superlatively well-written, we would be likely to dismiss it out of hand.

In similar fashion, you could excuse a science fiction writer for making use of impossibilities, carefully masked, but you cannot excuse a science fiction writer for the crime of being innocent of science. And believe me, it's not hard to recognize such ignorance. Someone trying to write science fiction without an understanding of science gives himself away a dozen times a page.

To be sure, there are people who are *not* trained (or, possibly, self-trained) in science, who nevertheless write superlative science fiction. I can name Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison as two examples. If you read their stories, however, you will note that they stay away from too close a contact with science; that they use it skillfully only as background for what they conceive to be their true aim, that of studying human behavior and reactions.

In any case, then, please do not treat science fiction as though it were fantasy. Fantasy is a field of its own and the writing of good fantasy has its own difficulties. Nevertheless, the two are different.

Science fiction *must* be plausible and fantasy need not be. Science fiction deals with a universe that might be reached through the proper changes in science and technology. Fantasy deals with a universe that need not be so reached. SF has science as its backbone; fantasy has magic. Got it? ●

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LETTERS

Dear Doctor Asimov,

While dozing off after devouring my latest edition of *IAsfm,* I awoke with a startling idea. Virtually every night I relax in my outdoor hot tub peering out at the stars wondering if there is intelligence out there. Not a new thought by any means, but one I often have in mind while reading my SF in bed. The idea I had was to cause our sun to appear to be turning off and on at a slow rate following a 1,2,4,8 sequence. That would certainly get our alien hot tubber's attention. I suspect a stabilized 100-foot disk with cut-outs could be sent toward our closest star in direct line with our sun. Hopefully we would see the same effect on Earth. The disk could have finer cut-outs with other information to appease whomever pays for it, as well as our future generations who think it's them sending the signal rather than us. I give this idea to you for two reasons:

1) What's the catch?

2) How about writing a story based on the idea.

Yours very truly,

Don Bradley
Morgan Hill, CA

I think you underestimate the difficulty of placing a thing in orbit so that it remains precisely between the sun and, let us say, Alpha Centauri. All objects must follow curved paths in response to ever-present gravitational attractions.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

As of late, or at least the January 1990 issue, there has been a lot of complaining about science fiction stories not really corresponding totally with reality. Now I realize this is someone's opinion, but I would just like to point out that these stories are science fiction, not science fact. This is one of the many reasons why I enjoy science fiction. It lets me escape the real world, and for all those who like to say that science fiction does not correspond with reality, I suggest that you, Dr. Asimov, start up a new magazine called *Isaac Asimov's Science Fact.* In this new magazine you could explore how medieval Europeans knew about Australia and the specific characteristics of the Ark of the Covenant, if it even exists.

Sincerely,

Joel Rennich
Dunlap, IL

Science fiction is based on science fact (see my editorial, "Imagination"), and the writer should not

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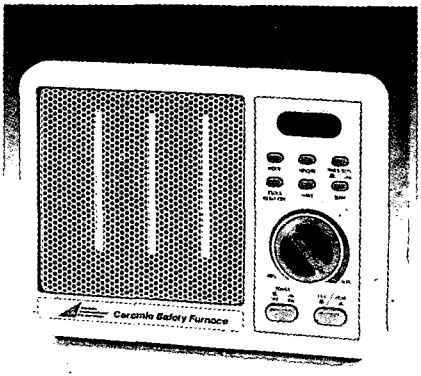

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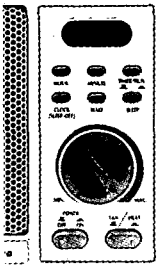

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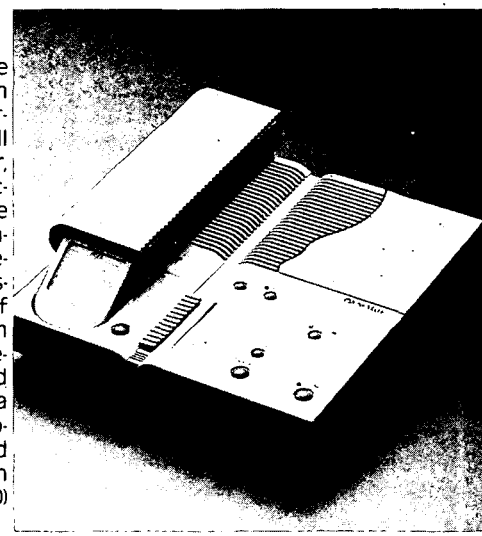

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show himself ignorant. Western fiction is fiction, *but a six-shooter doesn't spew out twenty-seven bullets without reloading even so. Historical fiction is* fiction, *but Queen Elizabeth I doesn't marry Winston Churchill even so. Please distinguish between science fiction and science ignorance.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I congratulate you on a magazine reminiscent of the golden age of science fiction. Thank you. I may be a new subscriber but I am not new to the joys of science fiction. My collection of keepers now number over four hundred and threatens to forcibly evict me from my den—which thrills the other members of my family no end.

While I continue to enjoy your stories and your answers to reader's letters, which give brief glimpses into your personality, I do take exception to a statement you made, most recently in answer to a letter in the January edition. In it you said: "I honestly believe it (faster-than-light-travel) is impossible."

I understand that there is more than ample scientific evidence to back up your statement. And, if pushed, it's a personal opinion which you are entitled to under the Constitution. But I would have thought as a scientist, and a writer of science fiction, you understood that nothing imaginable by man is impossible. The very concept of impossibility is itself impossible.

Would it not have been more accurate to say, that as yet we have not discovered the means to achieve FTL? To assume we now possess a consummate understanding of the Laws of Physics is extremely arrogant and unbecoming.

Not long ago I heard a noted physicist state with a straight face that there could not possibly be extraterrestrial visitors to our world because it would take them several thousand years to travel from one of the nearest stars by rocket. I knew the school system was screwed up but you'd think Einstein's Theory of Relativity and Time Dilation would be compulsory reading for physics.

Assuming our present knowledge is the be-all and end-all can lead to any number of problems. Similar to not understanding how the bumble bee manages to defy the Laws of Aerodynamics and fly. An amused nit picker,

L.C. Anderson
Victoria, B.C.
Canada

My friend, that thing about the bumblebee is a base canard. The bumblebee could not fly if its wings were flat and remained flat as the first simplifying assumption was set up. However, its wings do not remain flat but curl in such a way as to change the aerodynamic setup and they can *fly. If all that is imaginable is possible then we must give up science. I can imagine ghosts and fairies and people fifty feet high and three-way sex among extraterrestrials. Imagining isn't enough. Scientists work with* evidence.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In your editorial, "Attack!" (Feb. '90), you mentioned a few things

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that make you howl. What about book burning? In that same issue, Norman Spinrad mentions that he gets many review copies of books he refuses to read and jokes that, if he didn't mind burning books, he would never need firewood. Shame on him! But seriously, he should give those unwanted copies away. When I cull my book collection, I give the extras to the local library. If they happen to be paperbacks, our library has a section where people take what they want without having to check them out. (I first became acquainted with your magazine through copies someone had donated to that section.) He also might give them to a RIF or adult illiteracy program, a hospital, or a home for the elderly. Mr. Spinrad should remember that, even if he doesn't respect fantasy and horror, someone wants those books.

Defend yourself! A few months ago, I read a column you wrote in *F&SF*—way back in 1969, I believe—about your novelization of *Fantastic Voyage* and the impossibility of miniaturization. Now I read "Too Bad!" (Mid-Dec. '89) about miniaturizing a robot for medical use. Did you simply break the rules as you know them or is there some mitigating factor?

Concerning your editorial "Opinion II" (Jan. '90): I realized long ago that I disliked some stories that were well written and liked others that were flawed in some way. In all forms of art, people tend to characterize anything they like as good and whatever they dislike as bad. A mature person must realize that preferences in art are *entirely* subjective. I happen to dislike horror and romance stories and to *loathe* disco music, but that doesn't mean that those forms have no value (even if I can't see it). Some people may be able to judge the technical merit of a particular work of art, but no one can judge the value of that work for all people.

Have you ever considered publishing a pronunciation guide to the names of writers in the Science Fiction and Fantasy fields? I have read the works of Poul Anderson, Piers Anthony, and C. J. Cherryh for years and would appreciate knowing for certain the proper pronunciation of their names. Even *your* surname causes doubt—I've always pronounced it with three syllables but I've also heard it pronounced with only two.

Thank you,

Bob Fillpot
Satanta, KS

I don't break the rules. I simply allow for a bit of leeway. Suppose we did *learn to miniaturize. What would the consequences be? The story becomes a study of human nature, of the fact that a dedicated scientist would value the advance of knowledge and the survival of an important and, perhaps, irreplaceable artifact, over his own life.*

My name is in three syllables, but I hesitate about dictating the pronunciation of other people's names.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

Last Saturday, in a fit of ennui I picked up your January 1990 issue. I wasn't expecting much, as it was my cynical opinion Dr. Asimov

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very likely had nothing to do with your magazine outside of its name. I expected to find one good story if I was lucky, and a lot of bad ones if I was not. I am happy to say that I was wrong, and to humbly apologize. I was impressed with Dr. Asimov's participation, and *all* of the stories were remarkable.

My favorite story, "The Caress," held me spellbound. It is rare to find a unique story line, and rarer still to find it so well written. Thank Mr. Egan, and all of your contributing writers, for giving me the best of both worlds.

I had a marvelous time reading the letters section, and Dr. Asimov's often caustic rejoinders. I laughed out loud at his final reply to Samuel Ford, "How about tackling something easier, like spelling my name correctly?" I found the attacks on Mr. Remington, who, it appears, truly attained a new level of social ignorance and pomposity, equally amusing and entertaining. Thank you to your readers (and grouchy writers), for defending whimsy and satire. It is so poorly understood in this era of the "Outraged Christian." I have nothing against Christians, but I really detest self important bullies. It is good to know that someone out there shares my feelings.

Most of all, I enjoyed finding a new and truly remarkable publication which provides intellect and humor with good writing. Thank you for dispelling my foul mood on that weary afternoon, and letting me share in your world of laughter, wonder, struggle, and delight.

Your newest subscriber,

Max Adams
Irvine, CA

I'm glad you like the magazine, but the truth is that I contribute very little more than my name. If you enjoy the stories, please give credit to our Chestertonian editor, Gardner Dozois.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have a comment about your editorial, "Opinion II," in the January issue.

Let me begin by saying that I agree with much of what you expressed on the ticklish subject of opinions and who has the right to hold them. And I share your aversion to rock music. But I admit that I was a trifle disturbed about your brief discussion of democracy.

Here's why: you defended democracy by using the very popular utilitarian argument. You stated, in effect, that democracy is the best system because it works best. That may be true, but it is a very dangerous basis on which to settle a political system. If you adopt a political system simply because it works best, you run the risk that it may be replaced by something better.

There are probably many possible political systems that would be more efficient, rational, and economical than democracy. Technology offers some interesting alternatives. This kind of speculation has inspired many a science fiction story. And I believe that it represents a real danger in the future.

We need to get back to the original root of our political system — back to the notion that democracy is justified by the natural rights of human beings. Let us de-

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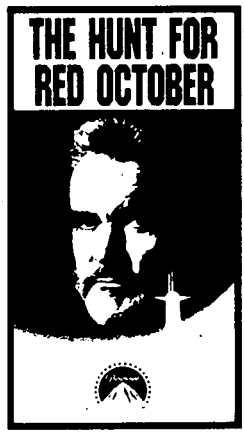

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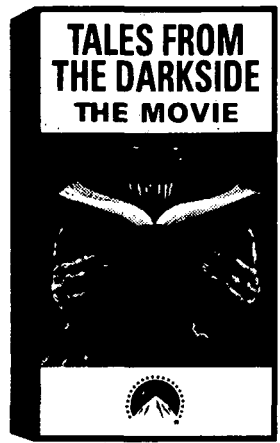

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fend democracy by saying that self-government is the born right of us all—that free political institutions are essential to the development of a truly humanistic society. Then we'll be on much safer ground.

I'm all for pragmatism—but let's not let it carry us away to some place we might not want to go.

Thomas M. Gregg
Mishawaka, IN

You sound a trifle eighteenth century-ish. I've never been sure about the "natural rights" of human beings. It seems to me that most people think that their "natural right" is to do as they wish and the hell with everyone else. Laws therefore become systems for limiting individual rights in favor of the social good. Right now, for instance, the natural rights of human beings are rapidly destroying the environment.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I am writing to express appreciation for your daring to include Deborah Wessell's story, "Joyride," in your February issue. Though a happily married woman, I am still a feminist, that is, a humanist with a predominant interest in women's fulfilling their potential, and I was gratified to come across a story in which women *liked* women! Of all the magazines I read, yours appears to make the best effort to include women amongst its contributing authors.

I very much enjoy your magazine and will continue to subscribe till death do us part. I feel that Mr. Asimov is a man of great integrity and imagine that his influence is reflected in his staff and policies. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Beverly Heinze
Santa Cruz, CA

I don't think there is anything mutually exclusive about being happily married and being a feminist. You surely can't suppose that to be happily married means to be content to be subservient and subhuman.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov,

While responding to the letter from George Brooks Jr., you said that *Huckleberry Finn* was the greatest American novel ever written. What criteria did you use to come to that conclusion? Since you used the qualifying term "American," what is the greatest novel ever written? Can that be determined or would you have to use other qualifying terms such as "European" or "science fiction?" Would the criteria be different?

Thank you,

Jonathan B. Medina
Hollister, CA

Such things are subjective. However, many people think Huckleberry Finn *is the greatest American novel, and I agree with them. Many people think the greatest of all novels is Tolstoy's* War and Peace, *but I think it is Cervantes'* Don Quixote.

—Isaac Asimov

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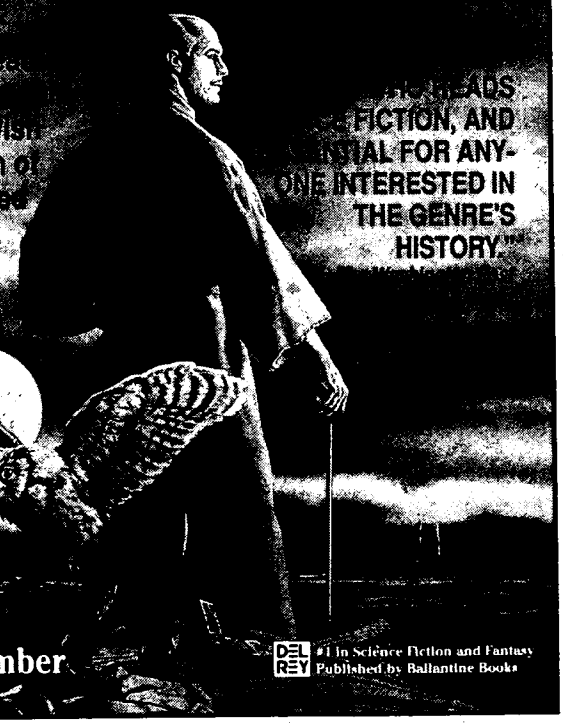

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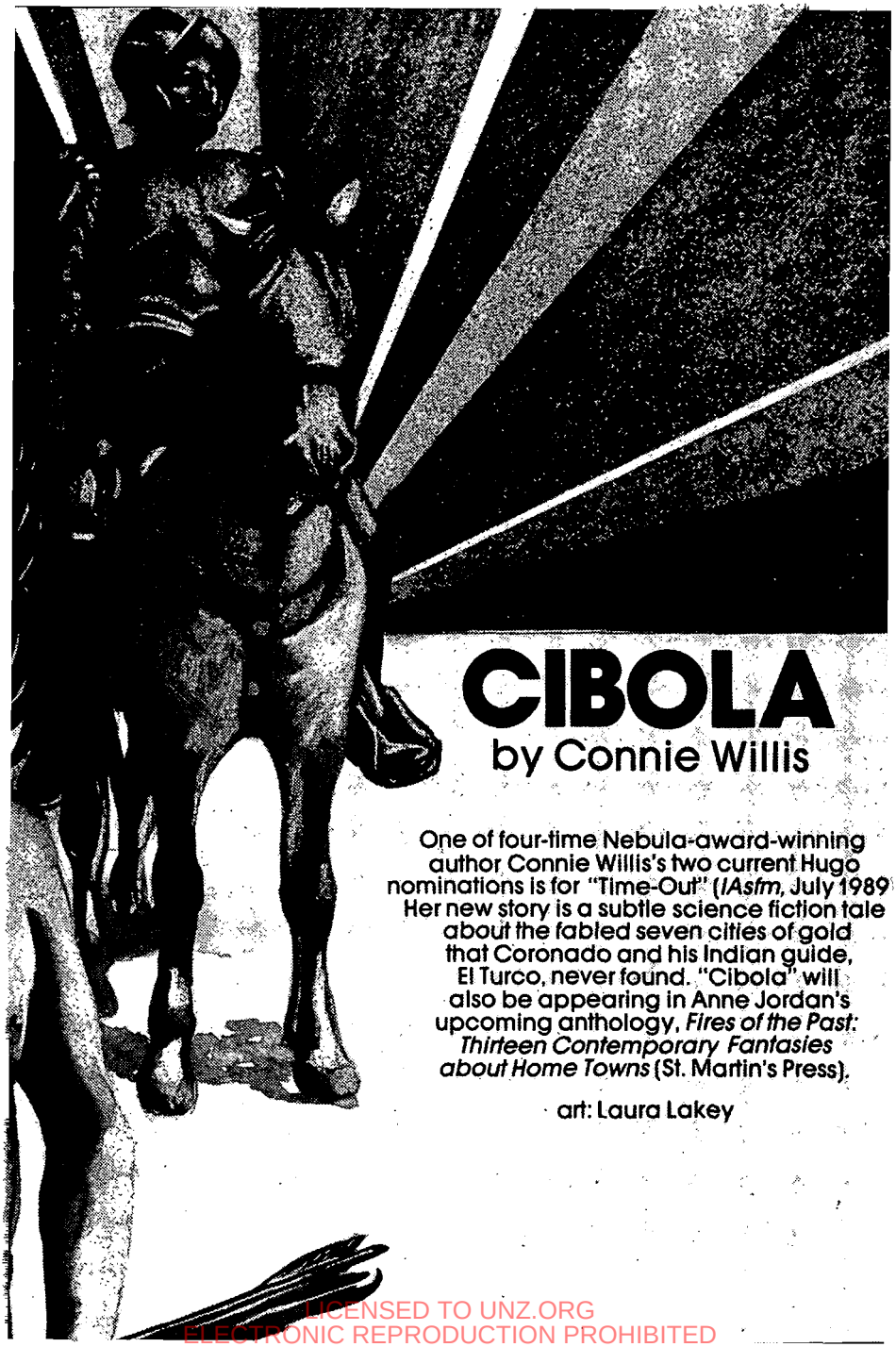

CIBOLA

by Connie Willis

One of four-time Nebula-award-winning author Connie Willis's two current Hugo nominations is for "Time-Out" (*IAsfm*, July 1989 Her new story is a subtle science fiction tale about the fabled seven cities of gold that Coronado and his Indian guide, El Turco, never found. "Cibola" will also be appearing in Anne Jordan's upcoming anthology, *Fires of the Past: Thirteen Contemporary Fantasies about Home Towns* (St. Martin's Press).

art: Laura Lakey

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"Carla, you grew up in Denver," Jake said. "Here's an assignment that might interest you."

This is his standard opening line. It means he is about to dump another "local interest" piece on me.

"Come on, Jake," I said. "No more nutty Bronco fans who've spray-painted their kids orange and blue, okay? Give me a real story. Please?"

"Bronco season's over, and the NFL draft was last week," he said. "This isn't a local interest."

"You're right there," I said. "These stories you keep giving me are of no interest, local or otherwise. I did the time machine piece for you. And the psychic dentist. Give me a break. Let me cover something that doesn't involve nuttos."

"It's for the 'Our Living Western Heritage' series." He handed me a slip of paper. "You can interview her this morning and then cover the skyscraper moratorium hearings this afternoon."

This was plainly a bribe, since the hearings were front page stuff right now, and "historical interests" could be almost as bad as locals—senile old women in nursing homes rambling on about the good old days. But at least they didn't crawl in their washing machines and tell you to push "rinse" so they could travel into the future. And they didn't try to perform psychic oral surgery on you.

"All right," I said, and took the slip of paper. "Rosa Turcorillo," it read and gave an address out on Santa Fe. "What's her phone number?"

"She doesn't have a phone," Jake said. "You'll have to go out there." He started across the city room to his office. "The hearings are at one o'clock."

"What is she, one of Denver's first Chicano settlers?" I called after him.

He waited till he was just outside his office to answer me. "She says she's the great-granddaughter of Coronado," he said, and beat a hasty retreat into his office. "She says she knows where the Seven Cities of Cibola are."

I spent forty-five minutes researching Coronado and copying articles and then drove out to see his great-granddaughter. She lived out on south Santa Fe past Hampden, so I took I-25 and then was sorry. The morning rush hour was still crawling along at about ten miles an hour pumping carbon monoxide into the air. I read the whole article stopped behind a semi between Speer and Sixth Avenue.

Coronado trekked through the Southwest looking for the legendary Seven Cities of Gold in the 1540s, which poked a big hole in Rosa's story, since any great-granddaughter of his would have to be at least three hundred years old.

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There wasn't any mystery about the Seven Cities of Cibola either. Coronado found them, near Gallup, New Mexico, and conquered them but they were nothing but mud-hut villages. Having been burned once, he promptly took off after another promise of gold in Quivira in Kansas someplace where there wasn't any gold either. He hadn't been in Colorado at all.

I pulled onto Santa Fe, cursing Jake for sending me on another wild-goose chase, and headed south. Denver is famous for traffic, air pollution, and neighborhoods that have seen better days. Santa Fe isn't one of those neighborhoods. It's been a decaying line of rusting railroad tracks, crummy bars, old motels, and waterbed stores for as long as I can remember, and I, as Jake continually reminds me, grew up in Denver.

Coronado's granddaughter lived clear south past Hampden, in a trailer park with a sign with "Olde West Motel" and a neon bison on it, and Rosa Turcorillo's old Airstream looked like it had been there since the days when the buffalo roamed. It was tiny, the kind of trailer I would call "Turcorillo's modest mobile home" in the article, no more than fifteen feet long and eight wide.

Rosa was nearly that wide herself. When she answered my knock, she barely fit in the door. She was wearing a voluminous turquoise housecoat, and had long black braids.

"What do you want?" she said, holding the metal door so she could slam it in case I was the police or a repo man.

"I'm Carla Johnson from the *Denver Record*," I said. "I'd like to interview you about Coronado." I fished in my bag for my press card. "We're doing a series on 'Our Living Western Heritage.' " I finally found the press card and handed it to her. "We're interviewing people who are part of our past."

She stared at the press card disinterestedly. This was not the way it was supposed to work. Nuttos usually drag you in the house and start babbling before you finish telling them who you are. She should already be halfway through her account of how she'd traced her ancestry to Coronado by means of the I Ching.

"I would have telephoned first, but you didn't have a phone." I said.

She handed the card to me and started to shut the door.

"If this isn't a good time, I can come back," I babbled. "And we don't have to do the interview here if you'd rather not. We can go to the *Record* office or to a restaurant."

She opened the door and flashed a smile that had half of Cibola's missing gold in it. "I ain't dressed," she said. "It'll take me a couple of minutes. Come on in."

I climbed the metal steps and went inside. Rosa pointed at a flowered couch, told me to sit down and disappeared into the rear of the trailer.

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I was glad I had suggested going out. The place was no messier than my desk, but it was only about six feet long and had the couch, a dinette set, and a recliner. There was no way it would hold me and Coronado's granddaughter, too. The place may have had a surplus of furniture but it didn't have any of the usual crazy stuff, no pyramids, no astrological charts, no crystals. A deck of cards was laid out like the tarot on the dinette table, but when I leaned across to look at them, I saw it was a half-finished game of solitaire. I put the red eight on the black nine.

Rosa came out, wearing orange polyester pants and a yellow print blouse and carrying a large black leather purse. I stood up and started to say, "Where would you like to go? Is there someplace close?" but I only got it half out.

"The Eldorado Cafe," she said and started out the door, moving pretty fast for somebody three hundred years old and three hundred pounds.

"I don't know where the Eldorado Cafe is," I said, unlocking the car door for her. "You'll have to tell me where it is."

"Turn right," she said. "They have good cinnamon rolls."

I wondered if it was the offer of the food or just the chance to go someplace that had made her consent to the interview. Whichever, I might as well get it over with. "So Coronado was your great-grandfather?" I said.

She looked at me as if I were out of my mind. "No. Who told you that?"

Jake, I thought, who I plan to tear limb from limb when I get back to the *Record*. "You aren't Coronado's great-granddaughter?"

She folded her arms over her stomach. "I am the descendant of El Turco."

El Turco. It sounded like something out of *Zorro*. "So it's this El Turco who's your great-grandfather?"

"Great-*great*. El Turco was Pawnee. Coronado captured him at Cicuye and put a collar around his neck so he could not run away. Turn right."

We were already halfway through the intersection. I jerked the steering wheel to the right and nearly skidded into a pickup.

Rosa seemed unperturbed. "Coronado wanted El Turco to guide him to Cibola," she said.

I wanted to ask if he had, but I didn't want to prevent Rosa from giving me directions. I drove slowly through the next intersection, alert to sudden instructions, but there weren't any. I drove on down the block.

"And did El Turco guide Coronado to Cibola?"

"Sure. You should have turned left back there," she said.

She apparently hadn't inherited her great-great-grandfather's scouting ability. I went around the block and turned left, and was overjoyed to see the Eldorado Cafe down the street. I pulled into the parking lot and we got out.

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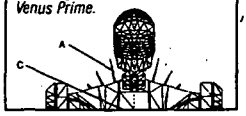

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"They make their own cinnamon rolls," she said, looking at me hopefully as we went in. "With frosting."

We sat down in a booth. "Have anything you want," I said. "This is on the *Record*."

She ordered a cinnamon roll and a large Coke. I ordered coffee and began fishing in my bag for my tape recorder.

"You lived here in Denver a long time?" she asked.

"All my life. I grew up here."

She smiled her gold-toothed smile at me. "You like Denver?"

"Sure," I said. I found the pocket-sized recorder and laid it on the table. "Smog, oil refineries, traffic. What's not to like?"

"I like it too," she said.

The waitress set a cinnamon roll the size of Mile High Stadium in front of her and poured my coffee.

"You know what Coronado fed El Turco?" The waitress brought her large Coke. "Probably one tortilla a day. And he didn't have no shoes. Coronado make him walk all that way to Colorado and no shoes."

I switched the tape recorder on. "You say Coronado came to Colorado," I said, "but what I've read says he traveled through New Mexico and Oklahoma and up into Kansas, but not Colorado."

"He was in Colorado." She jabbed her finger into the table. "He was *here*."

I wondered if she meant here in Colorado or here in the Eldorado Cafe.

"When was that? On his way to Quivira?"

"Quivira?" she said, looking blank. "I don't know nothing about Quivira."

"Quivira was a place where there was supposed to be gold," I said. "He went there after he found the Seven Cities of Cibola."

"He didn't find them," she said, chewing on a mouthful of cinnamon roll. "That's why he killed El Turco."

"Coronado killed El Turco?"

"Yeah. After he led him to Cibola."

This was even worse than talking to the psychic dentist.

"Coronado said El Turco made the whole thing up," Rosa said. "He said El Turco was going to lead Coronado into an ambush and kill him. He said the Seven Cities didn't exist."

"But they did?"

"Of course. El Turco led him to the place."

"But I thought you said Coronado didn't find them."

"He didn't."

I was hopelessly confused by now. "Why not?"

"Because they weren't there."

I was going to run Jake through his paper shredder an inch at a time.

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I had wasted a whole morning on this and I was not even going to be able to get a story out of it.

"You mean they were some sort of mirage?" I asked.

Rosa considered this through several bites of cinnamon roll. "No. A mirage is something that isn't there. These were there."

"But invisible?"

"No."

"Hidden."

"No."

"But Coronado couldn't see them?"

She shook her head. With her forefinger, she picked up a few stray pieces of frosting left on her plate and stuck them in her mouth. "How could he when they weren't there?"

The tape clicked off, and I didn't even bother to turn it over. I looked at my watch. If I took her back now I could make it to the hearings early and maybe interview some of the developers. I picked up the check and went over to the cash register.

"Do you want to see them?"

"What do you mean? See the Seven Cities of Cibola?"

"Yeah. I'll take you to them."

"You mean go to New Mexico?"

"No. I told you, Coronado came to Colorado."

"When?"

"When he was looking for the Seven Cities of Cibola."

"No, I mean when can *I* see them? Right now?"

"No," she said, with that, 'how dumb can anyone be?' look. She reached for a copy of the *Rocky Mountain News* that was lying on the counter and looked inside the back page. "Tomorrow morning. Six o'clock."

One of my favorite things about Denver is that it's spread all over the place and takes you forever to get anywhere. The mountains finally put a stop to things twenty miles to the west, but in all three other directions it can sprawl all the way to the state line and apparently is trying to. Being a reporter here isn't so much a question of driving journalistic ambition as of driving, period.

The skyscraper moratorium hearings were out on Colorado Boulevard across from the Hotel Giorgio, one of the skyscrapers under discussion. It took me forty-five minutes to get there from the Olde West Trailer Park.

I was half an hour late, which meant the hearings had already gotten completely off the subject. "What about reflecting glass?" someone in the audience was saying. "I think it should be outlawed in skyscrapers. I was nearly blinded the other day on the way to work."

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"Yeah," a middle-aged woman said. "If we're going to have skyscrapers, they should look like skyscrapers." She waved vaguely at the Hotel Giorgio, which looks like a giant black milk carton.

"And not like that United Bank building downtown!" someone else said. "It looks like a damned cash register!"

From there it was a short illogical jump to the impossibility of parking downtown, Denver's becoming too decentralized, and whether the new airport should be built or not. By five-thirty they were back on reflecting glass.

"Why don't they put glass you can see through in their skyscrapers?" an old man who looked a lot like the time machine inventor said. "I'll tell you why not. Because those big business executives are doing things they should be ashamed of, and they don't want us to see them."

I left at seven and went back to the *Record* to try to piece my notes together into some kind of story. Jake was there.

"How'd your interview with Coronado's granddaughter go?" he asked.

"The Seven Cities of Cibola are here in Denver only Coronado couldn't see them because they're not there." I looked around. "Is there a copy of the *News* someplace?"

"*Here?* In the *Record* building!" he said, clutching his chest in mock horror. "That bad, huh? You're going to go work for the *News?*" But he fished a copy out of the mess on somebody's desk and handed it to me. I opened it to the back page.

There was no "Best Times for Viewing Lost Cities of Gold" column. There were pictures and dates of the phases of the moon, road conditions, and "What's in the Stars: by Stella." My horoscope of the day read: "Any assignment you accept today will turn out differently than you expect." The rest of the page was devoted to the weather, which was supposed to be sunny and warm tomorrow.

The facing page had the crossword puzzle, "Today in History," and squibs about Princess Di and a Bronco fan who'd planted his garden in the shape of a Bronco quarterback. I was surprised Jake hadn't assigned me that story.

I went down to Research and looked up El Turco. He was an Indian slave, probably Pawnee, who had scouted for Coronado, but that was his nickname, not his name. The Spanish had called him "The Turk" because of his peculiar hair. He had been captured at Cicuye, *after* Coronado's foray into Cibola, and had promised to lead them to Quivira, tempting them with stories of golden streets and great stone palaces. When the stories didn't pan out, Coronado had had him executed. I could understand why.

Jake cornered me on my way home. "Look, don't quit," he said. "Tell

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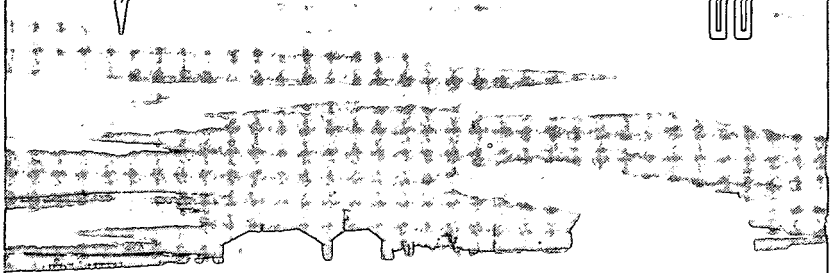

Jack Crow and his Team of vampire killers have it down to a science. First get the new living dead—then go after the Masters with anything it takes. Now, suddenly the game has changed and Crow and his Team have become the hunted. Somehow the Masters knew who they were. But Crow wasn't going to lie down and die. He and his Team planned to do some bloodletting of their own, even if it meant wading into the middle of a no-exit trap...

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you what, forget Coronado. There's a guy out in Lakewood who's planted his garden in the shape of John Elway's face. Daffodils for hair, blue hyacinths for eyes."

"Can't," I said, sidling past him. "I've got a date to see the Seven Cities of Gold."

Another delightful aspect of the Beautiful Mile-High City is that in the middle of April, after you've planted your favorite Bronco, you can get fifteen inches of snow. It had started getting cloudy by the time I left the paper, but fool that I was, I thought it was an afternoon thunderstorm. The *News*'s forecast had, after all, been for warm and sunny. When I woke up at four-thirty there was a foot and a half of snow on the ground and more tumbling down.

"Why are you going back if she's such a nut?" Jake had asked me when I told him I couldn't take the Elway garden. "You don't seriously think she's onto something, do you?" and I had had a hard time explaining to him why I was planning to get up at an ungodly hour and trek all the way out to Santa Fe again.

She was *not* El Turco's great-great-granddaughter. Two greats still left her at two hundred and fifty plus, and her history was as garbled as her math, but when I had gotten impatient she had said, "Do you want to see them?" and when I had asked her when, she had consulted the *News*'s crossword puzzle and said, "Tomorrow morning."

I had gotten offers of proof before. The time machine inventor had proposed that I climb in his washing machine and be sent forward to "a glorious future, a time when everyone is rich," and the psychic dentist had offered to pull my wisdom teeth. But there's always a catch to these offers.

"Your teeth will have been extracted in another plane of reality," the dentist had said. "X-rays taken in this plane will show them as still being there," and the time machine guy had checked his soak cycle and the stars at the last minute and decided there wouldn't be another temporal agitation until August of 2158.

Rosa hadn't put any restrictions at all on her offer. "You want to see them?" she said, and there was no mention of reality planes or stellar-laundry connections, no mention of any catch. Which doesn't mean there won't be one, I thought, getting out the mittens and scarf I had just put away for the season and going out to scrape the windshield off. When I got there she would no doubt say the snow made it impossible to see the Cities or I could only see them if I believed in UFO's. Or maybe she'd point off somewhere in the general direction of Denver's brown cloud and say, "What do you mean, you can't see them?"

I-25 was a mess, cars off the road everywhere and snow driving into

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my headlights so I could barely see. I got behind a snowplow and stayed there, and it was nearly six o'clock by the time I made it to the trailer. Rosa took a good five minutes to come to the door, and when she finally got there she wasn't dressed. She stared blearily at me, her hair out of its braids and hanging tangled around her face.

"Remember me? Carla Johnson? You promised to show me the Seven Cities?"

"Cities?" she said blankly.

"The Seven Cities of Cibola."

"Oh, yeah," she said, and motioned for me to come inside. "There aren't seven. El Turco was a dumb Pawnee. He don't know how to count."

"How many are there?" I asked, thinking, this is the catch. There aren't seven and they aren't gold.

"Depends," she said. "More than seven. You still wanta go see them?"

"Yes."

She went into the bedroom and came out after a few minutes with her hair braided, the pants and blouse of the day before and an enormous red carcoat, and we took off toward Cibola. We went south again, past more waterbed stores and rusting railroad tracks, and out to Belleview.

It was beginning to get fairly light out, though it was impossible to tell if the sun was up or not. It was still snowing hard.

She had me turn onto Belleview, giving me at least ten yards' warning, and we headed east toward the Tech Center. Those people at the hearing who'd complained about Denver becoming too decentralized had a point. The Tech Center looked like another downtown as we headed toward it.

A multi-colored downtown, garish even through the veil of snow. The Metropoint building was pinkish-lavender, the one next to it was midnight blue, while the Hyatt Regency had gone in for turquoise and bronze, and there was an assortment of silver, sea-green, and taupe. There was an assortment of shapes, too: deranged trapezoids, overweight butterflies, giant beer cans. They were clearly moratorium material, each of them with its full complement of reflecting glass, and, presumably, executives with something to hide.

Rosa had me turn left onto Yosemite, and we headed north again. The snowplows hadn't made it out here yet, and it was heavy going. I leaned forward and peered through the windshield, and so did Rosa.

"Do you think we'll be able to see them?" I asked.

"Can't tell yet," she said. "Turn right."

I turned into a snow-filled street. "I've been reading about your great-grandfather."

"Great-*great*," she said.

"He confessed he'd lied about the cities, that there really wasn't any gold."

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She shrugged. "He was scared. He thought Coronado was going to kill him."

"Coronado *did* kill him," I said. "He said El Turco was leading his army into a trap."

She shrugged again and wiped a space clear on the windshield to look through.

"If the Seven Cities existed, why didn't El Turco take Coronado to them? It would have saved his life."

"They weren't there." She leaned back.

"You mean they're not there all the time?" I said.

"You know the Grand Canyon?" she asked. "My great-great-grandfather discovered the Grand Canyon. He told Coronado he seen it. Nobody saw the Grand Canyon again for three hundred years. Just because nobody seen it don't mean it wasn't there. You was supposed to turn right back there at the light."

I could see why Coronado had strangled El Turco. If I hadn't been afraid I'd get stuck in the snow, I'd have stopped and throttled her right then. I turned around, slipping and sliding, and went back to the light.

"Left at the next corner and go down the block a little ways," she said, pointing. "Pull in there."

"There" was the parking lot of a donut shop. It had a giant neon donut in the middle of its steamed-up windows. I knew how Coronado felt when he rode into the huddle of mud huts that was supposed to have been the City of Gold.

"This is Cibola?" I said.

"No way," she said, heaving herself out of the car. "They're not there today."

"You *said* they were always there," I said.

"They are." She shut the car door, dislodging a clump of snow. "Just not all the time. I think they're in one of those time-things."

"Time-things? You mean a time warp?" I asked, trying to remember what the washing-machine guy had called it. "A temporal agitation?"

"How would I know? I'm not a scientist. They have good donuts here. Cream-filled."

The donuts were actually pretty good, and by the time we started home the snow had stopped and was already turning to slush, and I no longer wanted to strangle her on the spot. I figured in another hour the sun would be out, and John Elway's hyacinth-blue eyes would be poking through again. By the time we turned onto Hampden, I felt calm enough to ask when she thought the Seven Cities might put in another appearance.

She had bought a *Rocky Mountain News* and a box of cream-filled

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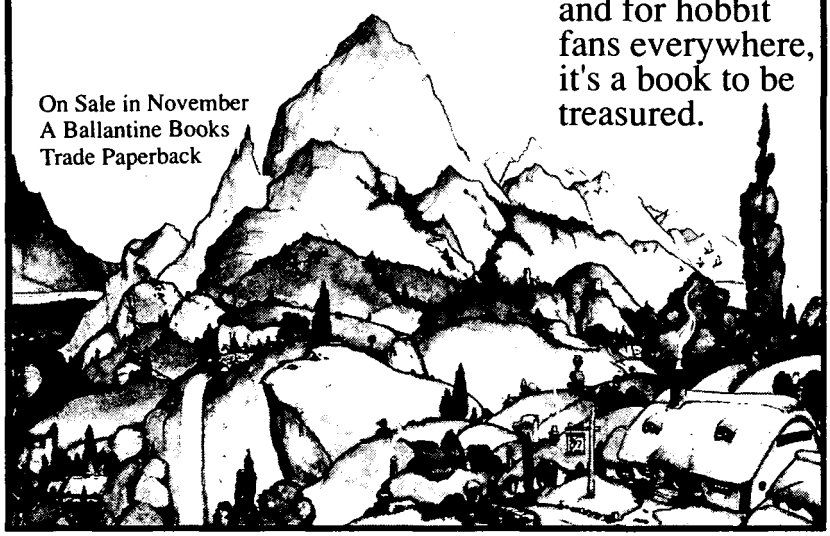

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donuts to take home. She opened the box and contemplated them. "More than seven," she said. "You like to write?"

"What?" I said, wondering if Coronado had had this much trouble communicating with El Turco.

"That's why you're a reporter, because you like to write?"

"No," I said. "The writing's a real pain. When will this time-warp thing happen again?"

She bit into a donut. "That's Cinderella City," she said, gesturing to the mall on our right with it. "You ever been there?"

I nodded.

"I went there once. They got marble floors and this big fountain. They got lots of stores. You can buy just about anything you want there. Clothes, jewels, shoes."

If she wanted to do a little shopping now that she'd had breakfast, she could forget it. And she could forget about changing the subject. "When can we go see the Seven Cities again? Tomorrow?"

She licked cream filling off her fingers and turned the *News* over. "Not tomorrow," she said. "El Turco would have liked Cinderella City. He didn't have no shoes. He had to walk all the way to Colorado in his bare feet. Even in the snow."

I imagined my hands closing around her plump neck. "When are the Seven Cities going to be there again?" I demanded. "And don't tell me they're always there."

She consulted the celebrity squibs. "Not tomorrow," she said. "Day after tomorrow. Five o'clock. You must like people, then. That's why you wanted to be a reporter? To meet all kinds of people?"

"No," I said. "Believe it or not, I wanted to travel."

She grinned her golden smile at me. "Like Coronado," she said.

I spent the next two days interviewing developers, environmentalists, and council members, and pondering why Coronado had continued to follow El Turco, even after it was clear he was a pathological liar.

I had stopped at the first 7-Eleven I could find after letting Rosa and her donuts off and bought a copy of the *News*. I read the entire back section, including the comics. For all I knew, she was using *Doonesbury* for an oracle. Or *Nancy*.

I read the obits and worked the crossword puzzle and then went over the back page again. There was nothing remotely time-warp-related. The moon was at first quarter. Sunset would occur at 7:51 P.M. Road conditions for the Eisenhower Tunnel were snow-packed and blowing. Chains required. My horoscope read, "Don't get involved in wild goose chases. A good stay-at-home day."

Rosa no more knew where the Seven Cities of Gold were than her

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great-great-grandfather. According to the stuff I read in between moratorium jaunts, he had changed his story every fifteen minutes or so, depending on what Coronado wanted to hear.

The other Indian scouts had warned Coronado, told him there was nothing to the north but buffalo and a few teepees, but Coronado had gone blindly on. "El Turco seems to have exerted a Pied-Piperlike power over Coronado," one of the historians had written, "a power which none of Coronado's officers could understand."

"Are you still working on that crazy Coronado thing?" Jake asked me when I got back to the *Record*. "I thought you were covering the hearings."

"I am," I said, looking up the Grand Canyon. "They've been postponed because of the snow. I have an appointment with the United Coalition Against Uncontrolled Growth at eleven."

"Good," he said. "I don't need the Coronado piece, after all. We're running a series on 'Denver Today' instead."

He went back upstairs. I found the Grand Canyon. It had been discovered by Lopez de Cardeñas, one of Coronado's men. El Turco hadn't been with him.

I drove out to Aurora in a blinding snowstorm to interview the United Coalition. They were united only in spirit, not in location. The president had his office in one of the Pavilion Towers off Havana, but the secretary, who had all the graphs and spreadsheets, was out at Fiddler's Green. I spent the whole afternoon shuttling back and forth between them through the snow, and wondering what had ever possessed me to become a journalist. I'd wanted to travel. I had had the idea, gotten from TV, that journalists got to go all over the world, writing about exotic and amazing places. Like the UNIPAC building and the Plaza Towers.

They were sort of amazing, if you like Modern Corporate. Brass and chrome and Persian carpets. Atriums and palm tress and fountains splashing in marble pools. I wondered what Rosa, who had been so impressed with Cinderella City, would have thought of some of these places. El Turco would certainly have been impressed. Of course, he would probably have been impressed by the donut shop, and would no doubt have convinced Coronado to drag his whole army there with tales of fabulous, cream-filled wealth.

I finished up the United Coalition and went back to the *Record* to call some developers and builders and get their side. It was still snowing, and there weren't any signs of snow removal, creative or otherwise, that I could see. I set up some appointments for the next day, and then went back down to Research.

El Turco hadn't been the only person to tell tales of the fabulous Seven Cities of Gold. A Spanish explorer, Cabeza de Vaca, had reported them

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first, and his black slave Estevanico claimed to have seen them, too. Friar Marcos had gone with Estevanico to find them, and, according to him, Estavanico had actually entered Cibola.

They had made up a signal. Estevanico was to send back a small cross if he found a little village, a big cross if he found a city. Estevanico was killed in a battle with Indians, and Friar Marcos fled back to Coronado, but he said he'd seen the Seven Cities in the distance, and he claimed that Estevanico had sent back "a cross the size of a man."

There were all kinds of other tales, too, that the Navajos had gold and silver mines, that Montezuma had moved his treasure north to keep it from the Spanish, that there was a golden city on a lake, with canoes whose oarlocks were solid gold. If El Turco had been lying, he wasn't the only one.

I spent the next day interviewing pro-uncontrolled growth types. They were united, too. "Denver has to retain its central identity," they all told me from what it was hard to believe was not a pre-written script. "It's becoming split into a half-dozen sub-cities, each with its own separate goals."

They were in less agreement as to where the problem lay. One of the builders who'd developed the Tech Center thought the Plaza Tower out at Fiddler's Green was an eyesore, Fiddler's Green complained about Aurora, Aurora thought there was too much building going on around Colorado Boulevard. They were all united on one thing, however: downtown was completely out of control.

I logged several thousand miles in the snow, which showed no signs of letting up, and went home to bed. I debated setting my alarm. Rosa didn't know where the Seven Cities of Gold were, the Living Western Heritage series had been canceled, and Coronado would have saved everybody a lot of trouble if he had listened to his generals.

But Estevanico had sent back a giant cross, and there was the "time-thing" thing. I had not done enough stories on psychic peridontia yet to start believing their nutto theories, but I had done enough to know what they were supposed to sound like. Rosa's was all wrong.

"I don't know what it's called," she'd said, which was far too vague. Nutto theories may not make any sense, but they're all worked out, down to the last bit of pseudo-scientific jargon. The psychic dentist had told me all about transcendental maxillofacial extractile vibrations, and the time travel guy had showed me a hand-lettered chart showing how the partial load setting affected future events.

If Rosa's Seven Cities were just one more nutto theory, she would have been talking about morphogenetic temporal dislocation and simultaneous reality modes. She would at least know what the "time-thing" was called.

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I compromised by setting the alarm on "music" and went to bed.

I overslept. The station I'd set the alarm on wasn't on the air at four-thirty in the morning. I raced into my clothes, dragged a brush through my hair, and took off. There was almost no traffic—who in their right mind is up at four-thirty?—and it had stopped snowing. By the time I pulled onto Santa Fe I was only running ten minutes late. Not that it mattered. She would probably take half an hour to drag herself to the door and tell me the Seven Cities of Cibola had canceled again.

I was wrong. She was standing outside waiting in her red carcoat and a pair of orange Bronco earmuffs. "You're late," she said, squeezing herself in beside me. "Got to go."

"Where?"

She pointed. "Turn left."

"Why don't you just tell me where we're going?" I said, "and that way I'll have a little advance warning."

"Turn right," she said.

We turned onto Hampden and started up past Cinderella City. Hampden is never free of traffic, no matter what time of day it is. There were dozens of cars on the road. I got in the center lane, hoping she'd give me at least a few feet of warning for the next turn, but she leaned back and folded her arms across her massive bosom.

"You're sure the Seven Cities will appear this morning?" I asked.

She leaned forward and peered through the windshield at the slowly lightening sky, looking for who knows what. "Good chance. Can't tell for sure."

I felt like Coronado, dragged from pillar to post. Just a little farther, just a little farther. I wondered if this could be not only a scam but a set-up, if we would end up pulling up next to a black van in some dark parking lot, and I would find myself on the cover of the *Record* as a robbery victim or worse. She was certainly anxious enough. She kept holding up her arm so she could read her watch in the lights of the cars behind us. More likely, we were heading for some bakery that opened at the crack of dawn, and she wanted to be there when the fried cinnamon rolls came out of the oven.

"Turn right!" she said. "Can't you go no faster?"

I went faster. We were out in Cherry Creek now, and it was starting to get really light. The snowstorm was apparently over. The sky was turning a faint lavender-blue.

"Now right, up there," she said, and I saw where we were going. This road led past Cherry Creek High School and then up along the top of the dam. A nice isolated place for a robbery.

We went past the last houses and pulled out onto the dam road. Rosa

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turned in her seat to peer out my window and the back, obviously looking for something. There wasn't much to see. The water wasn't visible from this point, and she was looking the wrong direction, out towards Denver. There were still a few lights, the early-bird traffic down on I-225 and the last few orangish street lights that hadn't gone off automatically. The snow had taken on the bluish-lavender color of the sky.

I stopped the car.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Go all the way up."

"I can't," I said, pointing ahead. "The road's closed."

She peered at the chain strung across the road as if she couldn't figure out what it was, and then opened the door and got out.

Now it was my turn to say, "What are you doing?"

"We gotta walk," she said. "We'll miss it otherwise."

"Miss what? Are you telling me there's going to be a time warp up there on top of the dam?"

She looked at me like I was crazy. "Time warp?" she said. Her grin glittered in my headlights. "No. Come on."

Even Coronado had finally said, "All right, enough," and ordered his men to strangle El Turco. But not until he'd been lured all the way up to Kansas. And, according to Rosa, Colorado. The Seven Cities of Cibola were *not* going to be up on top of Cherry Creek dam, no matter what Rosa said, and I wasn't even going to get a story out of this, but I switched off my lights and got out of the car and climbed over the chain.

It was almost fully light now, and the shadowy dimnesses below were sorting themselves out into decentralized Denver. The black *2001* towers off Havana were right below us, and past them the peculiar Mayan-pyramid shape of the National Farmer's Union. The Tech Center rose in a jumble off to the left, beer cans and trapezoids, and then there was a long curve of isolated buildings all the way to downtown, an island of skyscraping towers obviously in need of a moratorium.

"Come on," Rosa said. She started walking faster, panting along the road ahead of me and looking anxiously toward the east, where at least a black van wasn't parked. "Coronado shouldn't have killed El Turco. It wasn't his fault."

"What wasn't his fault?"

"It was one of those time-things, what did you call it?" she said, breathing hard.

"A temporal agitation?"

"Yeah, only he didn't know it. He thought it was there all the time, and when he brought Coronado there it wasn't there, and he didn't know what had happened."

She looked anxiously to the east again, where a band of clouds extending about an inch above the horizon was beginning to turn pinkish-

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gray, and broke into an ungainly run. I trotted after her, trying to remember the procedure for CPR.

She ran into the pullout at the top of the dam and stopped, panting hard. She put her hand up to her heaving chest and looked out across the snow at Denver.

"So you're saying the cities existed in some other time? In the future?"

She glanced over her shoulder at the horizon. The sun was nearly up. The narrow cloud turned pale pink, and the snow on Mt. Evans went the kind of fuschia we use in the Sunday supplements. "And you think there's going to be another time-warp this morning?" I said.

She gave me that "how can one person be so stupid" look. "Of course not," she said, and the sun cleared the cloud. "There they are," she said.

There they were. The reflecting glass in the curved towers of Fiddler's Green caught first, and then the Tech Center and the Silverado Building on Colorado Boulevard, and the downtown skyline burst into flames. They turned pink and then orange, the Hotel Giorgio and the Metropoint building and the Plaza Towers, blazing pinnacles and turrets and towers.

"You didn't believe me, did you?" Rosa said.

"No," I said, unwilling to take my eyes off of them. "I didn't."

There were more than seven. Far out to the west the Federal Center ignited, and off to the north the angled lines of grain elevators gleamed. Downtown blazed, blinding building moratorium advocates on their way to work. In between, the Career Development Institute and the United Bank Building and the Hyatt Regency burned gold, standing out from the snow like citadels, like cities. No wonder El Turco had dragged Coronado all the way to Colorado. Marble palaces and golden streets.

"I told you they were there all the time," she said.

It was over in another minute, the fires going out one by one in the panes of reflecting glass, downtown first and then the Cigna building and Belleview Place, fading to their everyday silver and onyx and emerald. The Pavilion Towers below us darkened and the last of the sodium street lights went out.

"There all the time," Rosa said solemnly.

"Yeah," I said. I would have to get Jake up here to see this. I'd have to buy a *News* on the way home and check on the time of sunrise for tomorrow. And the weather.

I turned around. The sun glittered off the water of the reservoir. There was an aluminum rowboat out in the middle of it. It had golden oarlocks.

Rosa had started back down the road to the car. I caught up with her. "I'll buy you a pecan roll," I said. "Do you know of any good places around here?"

She grinned. Her gold teeth gleamed in the last light of Cibola. "The best," she said. ●

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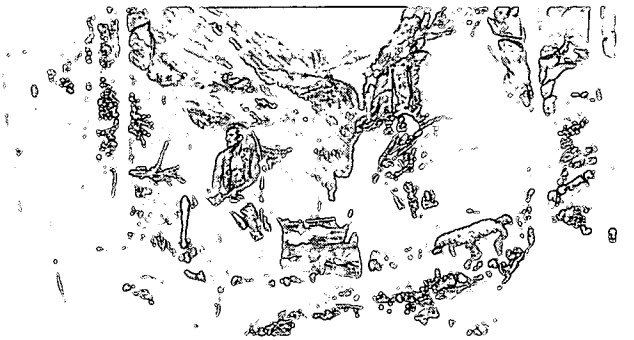

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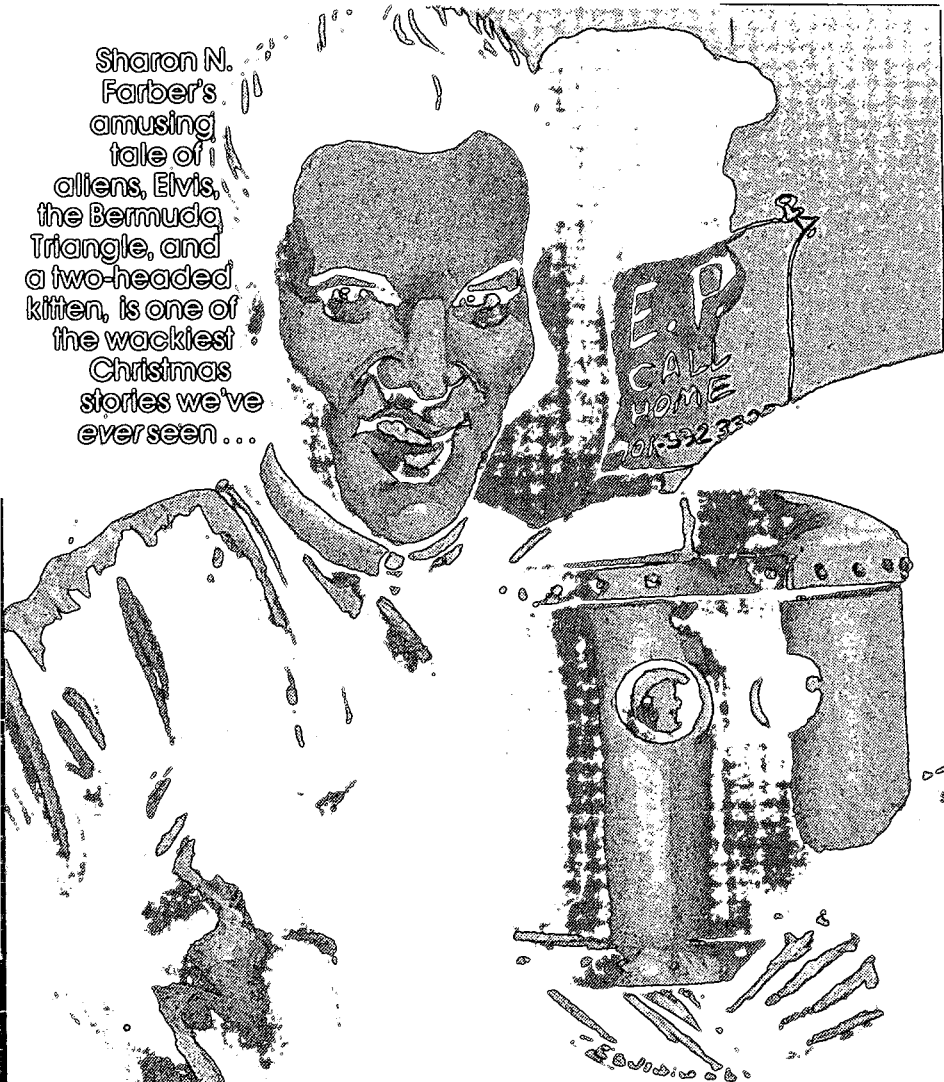

SPACE ALIENS SAVED MY MARRIAGE

by Sharon N. Farber

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art: Laura Lakey

When I got home from work, Tim was still in the kitchen, drinking coffee and reading the sports page. Construction's slow in December. The kitten began rubbing up against my leg and purring the minute I came in.

"What do you think, honey?" I asked, petting the kitten. "Shouldn't we give Mittens two names? I mean, she does have two heads, and all."

Tim said, "Whatever you want," but Stacy stopped splashing her spoon in her Count Chockula and pointed at each head. "Muffin. Tiffany."

"Good names," I told her, pouring Muffin and Tiffany a saucer of milk. As usual, the two heads began squabbling over their treat.

"Any newspapers, Bobby June?" asked Tim.

When the new tabloids come out, I get to take home the old ones, along with the day old bread and mushy bananas. I'd already read them all, of course. The Quik-Stop-Shop gets real slow after around 2 A.M. "Look here: *HOUSEWIFE SEES ELVIS IN LAUNDROMAT*. It happened in our town!"

"Forget it," said Tim. "People are always seeing Elvis. Didn't that spaceship, Voyager or whatever it was, see his face on Mars?" This was the longest conversation we'd had since we were visiting my Aunt Martha in Austin, and saw the ghost of Uncle Edgar in the closet. So I figured, maybe this is the time to bring it up.

"Tim honey, it's Christmas Eve tomorrow. Don't you have any relatives you'd like to invite for dinner, to meet me and Stacy and all?"

"No," he said, and went off to read the papers somewhere else.

I have trouble sleeping when I work third-shift, so I took Stacy shopping for shoes. It's incredible how quick she seems to outgrow them—she's only four, and already in a grownup size 6. She has her dad's feet, I guess, but luckily she has my nose.

Anyway, the mall was pretty crowded, what with it being the day before the day before Christmas. We did a little last-minute shopping for presents, and we were buying this cute little dog and cat salt and pepper set for Jesse, my friend-at-work, when a woman shrieked.

"Oh, my god!" she yelled, pointing up at a black velvet painting of Elvis. Tears seemed to be pouring from his eyes.

"Why's he crying, Mommy?" asked Stacy.

The clerk got up on a ladder and pulled down the painting, to check for leaks or something in the wall, but nothing else was wet.

The woman who'd seen it first reached over and touched the tears, then raised her finger to her mouth. "It's salty," she said. "Those are real tears!"

I looked at the painting, and it seemed that the wet eyes were staring

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deep into my own. And suddenly this thought was there, in my mind. *You'd better go to County Mercy General. There's been an emergency.*

When we got to the hospital, it seemed they'd been looking for me. Grannie had had this bad stomach ache, and they'd been worried she'd bled into a big old fibroid tumor she'd had for a long time, only they hadn't wanted to operate before, what with her being so old and all, but now they'd had to operate after all, and her doctor wanted to talk with me, right outside the operating room.

He was still wearing green clothes and a paper hat and booties, just like on TV. He didn't mince words, just started right out. "Your grandmother's had a baby."

"But that's impossible," I said. "Gran's seventy-eight!"

He got that narrow-eyed little look that doctors get when they think you don't believe them, and said, "Of course it's possible—it happened. It seems your grandmother had been pregnant with twins over fifty years ago, but only one of them actually got born."

Then he talked about ovulation, and hibernation, and a lot of other complicated stuff I didn't get, cause I mean, I dropped out in eleventh grade to work and all. But the long and the short of it seemed to be that this baby had been in her womb for fifty-five years, and in fact was my late daddy's twin. They'd compared footprints, and it was true.

"But that's not the end of it," the doctor continued. "I've seen a lot of weird stuff—I've delivered babies wearing ancient Egyptian amulets, or tattooed with holy symbols, and once I saw a woman give birth to a Cabbage Patch Doll. But never in all my years of practicing has one of my newborns ever spoken in the delivery room before!"

"What'd he say?"

"When I slapped his little behind, he didn't even cry, he just looked me in the eye and said 'The Twin returns. Love him tender and don't be cruel.' He wouldn't say anything more, and now he's acting just like a regular baby." The doctor took off his paper hat and scratched his head. "*The Twin*. Must be himself he means, right?"

"No. No, it isn't." I didn't know yet what he meant, back then, but I knew that something big was going on, or about to happen.

What with staying with Gran all afternoon, and then making dinner for Stacy and Tim, I only had a few hours sleep before going to work. I was a couple minutes late, but Ralph always covers for me—he's a real good guy. He was this World War II veteran who they found after drifting alone in a liferaft in the Bermuda Triangle for forty years, but he didn't let that ruin his attitude.

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"Congratulate me, I'm gonna get hitched," Ralph told me while he was putting on his muffler and overcoat.

"Who to?" I didn't even know he was dating. As far as I knew, his only real friend was this guy Eddy he'd known in basic training, who'd looked him up after seeing his picture in the paper.

"I'm marrying Eddy," Ralph said, sort of blushing. "No really, it's not like that. See, he was struck by lightning last year, and it turned him into a woman!"

"Wow!" I remembered reading about it, but never realized who it had been. "Well, good luck and everything." We'd have to put on a shower for them.

Jesse had been in back, and now he came in to restock the chips. "Heard about Ralph and Eddy?" he asked. He's got this real velvety deep voice, but I never could figure out his accent.

"I hope they'll be happy," I said, started thinking about me and Tim, and choked a little. Jesse came over to hug me—we're only friends, really—and I told him how me and Tim just didn't seem to communicate anymore. Then I wiped away my tears, and looked at Jesse. "Hey! You've been losing weight."

"It's that *eat all you want and lose a pound a day diet.* Works!" A customer came in to pay for some gas, so Jesse went back to restock the Oreos and Pecan Sandies.

The customer—he was paying with a credit card—said "Your stock-clerk looks a lot like Elvis, don't you think?"

"No, not really . . ." I mean, I just thought of him as my friend Jesse, and never really thought much about his face, you know?

"Yeah," continued the customer, pointing to some cigarettes, so I had to ring him up all over again. "Yeah, they've been seeing Elvis all over—the post office in Decatur, a McDonalds in Fresno, the Baseball Hall of Fame . . . . Now I've seen him here in a convenience store. Think I'll make the papers?"

We laughed a little about that. Another customer, buying milk and bread, put her stuff down on the counter. "Don't laugh," she said. "Yesterday, totally unexpected, my cat dragged in an old monophonic record album, looking brand new. It was *Blue Hawaii!"*

We were pretty impressed by how strange that was, including Jesse, who'd come over to listen. "I tell you," the lady continued, "something's brewing. It feels kind of like a storm, about to break." She noticed Jesse. "Hey, anyone ever said you look like Elvis?"

"No ma'am. Maybe Roy Orbison," he answered.

She looked him over again. "Yeah, guess you're right. Well, Merry Christmas everyone."

Things stayed quiet for a while, and around midnight Brian the night

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supervisor came by to check on us. I didn't like Brian much, he was always acting like he thought you were stealing money from the store, but I was real pleasant, and didn't suspect much when he sent Jesse in back to inventory all the cookies and sodas, to see what we'd need extra to last over the holidays.

"Come here!" Brian called, from over the back aisle, where the candy and toys are.

"Uh oh," I thought. Some kids must've snuck in while I wasn't paying attention, and taken some toys and left the plastic containers behind. They do that if you don't watch careful.

But everything looked okay on the novelty rack. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing's wrong," said Brian. "I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas," and he started to kiss me.

"Hey!" I said, trying to make like it was a joke. I mean, I needed the job, you know? "Hey, there's no mistletoe here." I pushed him away—and then he opened his mouth and showed me these fangs like the plastic Dracula teeth we sell at Halloween, only his looked real.

"Brian, what the . . ."

And suddenly he was biting me on the throat, and I couldn't call for help. . . .

I seemed to be sliding down this long dark tunnel, and there was a light at the end, and my parents, and my grandparents (except for Gran of course), and everyone I knew who ever died including my ninth grade boyfriend who fell in the drainage ditch, and all the dogs and cats I ever owned, were there to welcome me. Only when I got to the end of the tunnel, there was this view like in an old movie house with just one big screen, and it was showing Earth, and this big old rocky asteroid heading right for it. At first I thought it was something out of a Star Trek movie, but then I realized it was for real. And then the space scene was gone, and Elvis was there—Elvis himself—smiling at me. Just smiling. And he raised up one hand and said to me, "Go back and warn them."

Next thing I knew, I was on the floor back in the Quik-Stop-Shop, and Jesse was putting cold rags on my forehead.

"I thought you'd died," he said.

"I did!" I tried to sit up, making it the second time, and noticed the floor was all wet with milk, and this slimy yellow and red gunk I didn't recognize, but smelled awful. "What happened—is that stuff Brian?"

Jesse nodded. "I threw milk on him—it dissolves vampires. Too wholesome or something, I dunno, but it works every time. Mind, you have to use whole milk. Skim or 2 percent just won't work."

"Jesse, you got to listen to this dream I just had." I told him about the tunnel, and the asteroid, and Elvis. Jesse just rocked back and forth on

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his heels. Finally he said, "It ain't no dream, Bobby June. It's for real, and we must act quick if we're to save the planet."

I was still kind of dazed, what with dying and coming back and all, so I didn't hardly protest when he closed up the store, and we started driving. I didn't even really care where we were going. I just sat wrapped in a blanket—his pickup didn't have heat—and looked out the window at the big old full moon.

"You see, this is the culmination of my stay upon the Earth," Jesse said.

"Huh?"

"I'm the Twin who returned," he said. "The one your little baby uncle was talking about."

"Huh?" The night was weird enough without old Jesse getting bizarre on me. I looked at him like for the first time. He did look like Elvis. "Who are you?"

"Like I said, I'm the Twin. Elvis's twin brother Jesse, who supposedly died at birth, but who was really taken off planet and raised in a UFO."

"You mean the UFO people who steal missing children and eat them?"

"Nope—those guys're from Andromeda."

"Then, the UFO people who take your pets or lawn ornaments for company, and return them a year later?"

"Nope—Betelgeuse."

"Then how about the ones who hover outside your window and won't let you eat junk food?"

"Those busybodies? I should hope not. No, my UFO was from the Southern Cross, and they're real benevolent folk there."

I suddenly began to snuffle. "Poor Jesse. Taken away from your family and raised with weird aliens."

He took his hand off the wheel long enough to pat me on the shoulder. "It wasn't that bad. The scenery was nice, and we got Lucy reruns on the radio telescope. Besides, I'm half-space alien myself, so I had kinfolk."

His face got real sad. "Poor brother Elvis, he never even knew the truth about his heritage. That's why he ate too much, and drank, and did drugs. Earth food didn't have all the essential vitamins and minerals he needed."

"Oh!" Suddenly it made sense, Jesse's always sucking on a Tictac. "Your breath mints are from space too!"

"Right. They're to compensate for dietary deficiencies, and to protect me from the pollution."

Lots more was making sense. Like those Elvis sightings, all over the country. They'd been Jesse, just wandering about waiting for whatever it was he'd been sent to our planet to stop to happen so he could stop it. As he drove, he told me a little about how he traveled around, always

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one step ahead of reporters, and the KGB, and bad aliens who didn't want him to save the Earth.

Then we got to where we were going, which was the observatory up near the university. I hadn't been there since a field trip in second grade. Jesse got us inside—he could be real impressive—but the egghead types there were snooty, and wouldn't believe us.

"Asteroid coming in to destroy us? Give me a break," said the professor in charge, but then Jesse took him aside and whispered in his ear for a while, and when they came back, the man was pale. "Turn the scope around," he ordered, and began searching the sky.

"What'd you say?" I asked Jesse.

He shrugged. "I just told him things only he knew about himself—like, he really doesn't like sushi, and he always wanted to be a fireman, and he's got this secret crush on Vanna White."

It took a while, but then the professor came back, even paler, said "You were right!" and began making lots of important phone calls.

Pretty soon—well, really it was hours later, but I slept through the flight to Washington and was still half asleep when we met the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff—pretty soon we were at the United Nations. They'd let me call Tim from the White House, and the President's wife, who was pretty nice, told them to send a plane to pick up Tim and Stacy so they could be with me.

So we were all up there at the UN. First the professor talked, and a bunch of other professors from all sorts of countries agreed with him. Then everyone got in a panic, because this asteroid was going to hit the Earth in a month or so, and smash us to bits, and we didn't have any missiles big enough to stop it.

I was kind of mad about that, thinking about Stacy not even getting old enough for kindergarten, and I said to the President, "Here I voted for you, and you spend all this money on bombs and stuff, and you can't even stop one lousy asteroid." He looked sort of upset, which got me feeling bad, so I apologized.

"It's okay," he told me. "We're all a bit on edge."

Then Jesse got up, and talked about how he had a plan and would need lots of cooperation. Our professor did some calculations and said it'd work. But lots of them still didn't believe Jesse.

"I guess I'll just have to convince you, then," he said, and asked someone to fetch him a guitar, and right there in the UN assembly hall, he started to sing. And maybe his voice wasn't much better than his brother's, who you have to admit was the greatest singer ever lived, but Jesse'd been trained by aliens, and he knew how to use that extra nine-tenths of the brain that none of the rest of us uses, so it was the best singing anyone

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ever thought they'd ever hear. Pretty soon everyone didn't know if they wanted to cry or applaud, and when they'd all calmed down and the medics had taken away the delegates who'd passed out or had heart attacks, everyone voted to go with Jesse's plan.

So there it was, Christmas Eve day, and Jesse had a radio hookup to everywhere on Earth. They asked if he wanted translators, but he said no—and sure enough, when he started talking, slow and kind of loud, everyone understood him, no matter what language they usually talked.

"I want everyone in the Western Hemisphere and Europe and Africa to just stand real still," he said into the radio. I was kind of awed, thinking how everyone all over the world was hearing my friend Jesse's words. And trusting and believing him too, because he sounded like his brother, and everyone on Earth knows about Elvis. "And I want everyone in the East, in China and Japan and . . ." Well, I'll just skip the list of countries, cause I don't exactly know where most of them were, or how to spell them either.

". . . I want every one of you to go get a kitchen chair exactly eighteen inches tall—that's forty-six centimeters—"

It was real impressive how smart Jesse was.

"You can put some books or plywood on the seat if it isn't exactly eighteen inches. Now I want you to get up on those chairs, every one of you. Come on now." He waited a bit, so folks who were old or young or maybe had arthritis could get onto their chairs. "Now when I say go—hold on, not yet, when I say Go, I want everyone to jump. Okay, all ready?"

He looked over at me, and I smiled and crossed my fingers.

He leaned close to his microphone. "Okay. Ready, set—jump!"

And all over China and Japan and all those other countries, people jumped off their kitchen chairs.

The ground shook a little, and Stacy began to cry. I comforted her, and Tim put his arm around my shoulder.

The professor was talking on the phone to some other scientists, who were somewhere or other doing stuff, and he put his hand over the receiver and shouted "It worked! It worked! When the Asians all jumped, they pushed the Earth slightly out of its orbit, so now that asteroid is going to miss us. We're saved!"

Everyone began to cheer and hug each other. Then we got quiet, because we'd all noticed a dayglow orange UFO hovering outside the windows.

Jesse came over and took my hands. "You've been a right good friend, Bobby June, and I'm gonna miss you."

Stacy said, "You goin' somewhere, Uncle Jesse?"

He put a hand on her head—and her hair's been blond and naturally

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curly ever since—and said, "My job, and my brother's, is over, Stacy. I'm going home. But first. . ."

He took Tim aside a bit. "Now Tim," he said, "I know you love your wife, but you have to talk with her."

"But if I do, if she learns the truth about me," Tim answered, "she wouldn't love me no more."

"Now, you know that isn't true. Don't be afraid," Jesse told him.

Tim said to me, "Bobby June, I wouldn't blame you if you leave me when I tell you this. The reason we never visit my relatives, and the reason I have so much trouble finding shoes that fit—sweetheart, I'm Bigfoot.

"Well, I'm not really Bigfoot," he continued. "I'm just his little brother. But you get the idea."

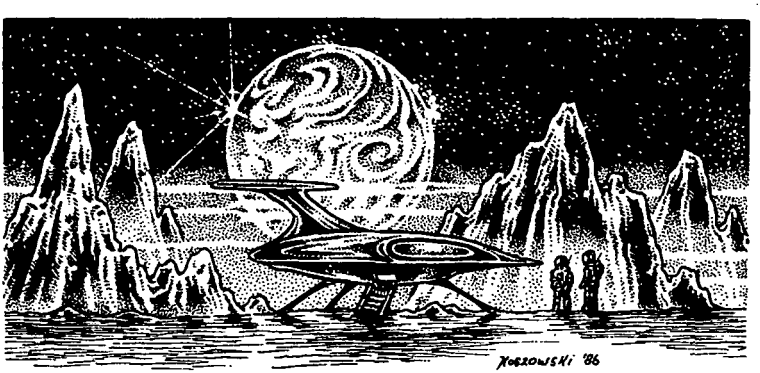
I said, "Honey, I wouldn't care if you were the Loch Ness Monster, you're still my man," and I hugged Tim, and Stacy jumped up and down cause she could tell things were going to be okay from now on.

Jesse went to the window, stepping onto a gangplank from the UFO. "Wouldn't you and your family like to spend the holiday with your relatives, Tim?"

"Sure would," said Tim. "But we couldn't get no flight to Oregon on Christmas Eve, and anyway, we don't have no presents either."

"Forget airplanes," grinned Jesse. "We can drop you off on our way. And I'm sure we can find something around the saucer for you to give your folks." He waved us to the gangplank.

"Oh boy!" cried Stacy. "This is going to be the best Christmas ever! And I also predict major conflict in the Mideast, a startling new career development for Linda Evans, and all the dogs in Denver will lose their hair but learn to speak . . ." ●



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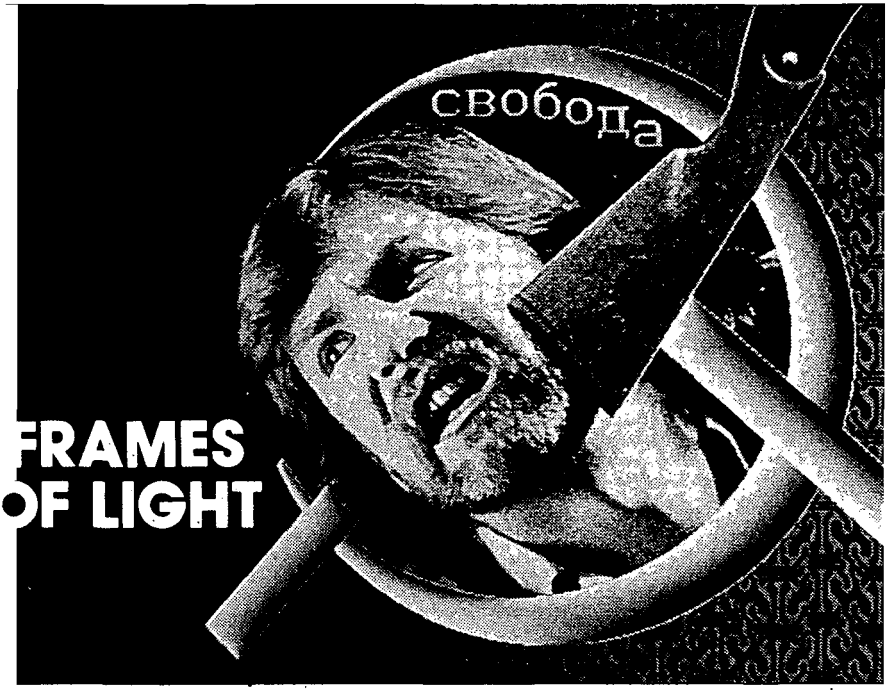

FRAMES OF LIGHT

by Lawrence Person

The author is a twenty-five-year-old bachelor living in Austin, Texas. His nonfiction has appeared in the *National Review, Science Fiction Eye, Reason, Whole Earth Review,* and *Nova Express.* "Frames of Light" is his first fiction sale.

art: Rick Lieder

On the screen, a soldier runs after a protestor in total silence. The protestor turns, trying to put his sign between the pursuing soldier and himself. The soldier knocks the sign aside with his rifle, then slams its stock into the protestor's head.

"Stop," said an old but firm voice in the darkness.

The image on the screen froze.

"Change the sign into a gun."

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The man at the console pressed a few keys. The images moved backward, then froze again as two green lines converged on the protestor's sign. It disappeared and was replaced with a rifle.

"Play it again."

On screen, the counterrevolutionary runs away from the soldier, then turns and brings his rifle to bear. The soldier knocks the rifle away with his own, then hits the now disarmed rebel in the head with its butt.

"Amazing," said the old man, then was silent as he lit a cigarette. The flame of the lighter illuminated the craggy face of a man in his mid-to-late sixties, with deep-set dark brown eyes and thin lips. A few wisps of black hair still showed among the grey. His uniform was neatly pressed. He took a long drag, then exhaled slowly.

"I'm surprised, Comrade Berdyaev," the technician said, "You've seen the imaging equipment before, surely."

"Yes, but it never ceases to amaze me. Stop."

The screen froze again, this time upon the image of a woman carrying a sign saying FREEDOM NOW in capital Cyrillic letters. A soldier was moving rapidly toward her from the right, gun ready to fire.

"Change the sign to DEATH TO LIGACHEV. And make her uglier."

The other man tapped his keyboard again and the letters on the sign changed. Another few strokes, and the women's face became thin and harsh, dark circles under her eyes.

"Ah, Piotr," sighed the old man, "you don't know how lucky you are. In my early days with the bureau, we thought an airbrush was the latest in *high technology*. But these computers . . . amazing."

"It's a wonderful machine, Comrade Berdyaev. We've only had it a year. What are you going to do with the one who shot this footage?"

Berdyaev shrugged, then took another drag on his cigarette. "We'll hold him, call him a spy. Washington will scream and howl, but eventually they'll give in and give us one of our own back in exchange. In the meantime, we'll send his altered tape out to his, oh, what do you call them? Oh yes, his *network*, make it look like it was smuggled out. By the time he sees it, it will already have aired."

"Do you think it will fool them?"

Berdyaev shrugged again. "It will confuse the issue, give credence to our statements about an armed uprising. And the longer we throw them off the scent about Armenia, the less likely they are to find out about the Ukraine. Rewind the tape."

The tape rewound and started again. The two of them stared at the screen.

"Amazing," said Berdyaev yet again. "Such splendid technology."

"We requested another one, but the bureau hasn't acted yet."

Berdyaev gave a hollow chuckle. "I doubt you'll get one now. The

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Americans have already started sanctions." He held up his cigarette. "See this? American. The price has already tripled on the black market." Berdyaev took one last drag, then dropped the butt to the floor and crushed it under his shoe.

"It's just as well, really. They were killing me anyway, making me soft. That was the entire problem with Gorbachev. He made us soft."

The computer operator turned to look at him a moment, then turned away, eyes fixed with unwavering attention on the frame-bound images of light and shadow.

"We were not meant to be a soft people," Berdyaev said, and, in spite of himself, the computer operator shivered. ●

ASTROLOGY COLUMN

They say the planets' motions give the truth,
The soothsayers, and that by careful art
(Part of which is old, part quite modern)
Gods can be persuaded to reveal
A really useful guide for our behavior:
"Save your energy today.
Stay inside and prepare
A rare treat for your loved one.
Fun and games tonight." —or some such truthful
Useful generality. But you'll never find
These lines: "Sorry. You're gonna take a header.
Better make a will." Although
You know that advice is sadly true for
A few score people; an obituary page full.
Mull it over, though. You can't have twenty million Geminis
All demise at once. Every Cancer get cancer. So
astrologers
Apologize in advance: On your second most important
day
They will be dead wrong.

I have a hobby. I collect astrologers' runes
For June 28, 1914. If just one would say
"Today begins a century of war. God help us. Amen."
Then I will believe. Not until then.

—Joe Haldeman

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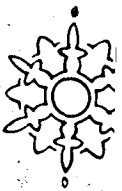

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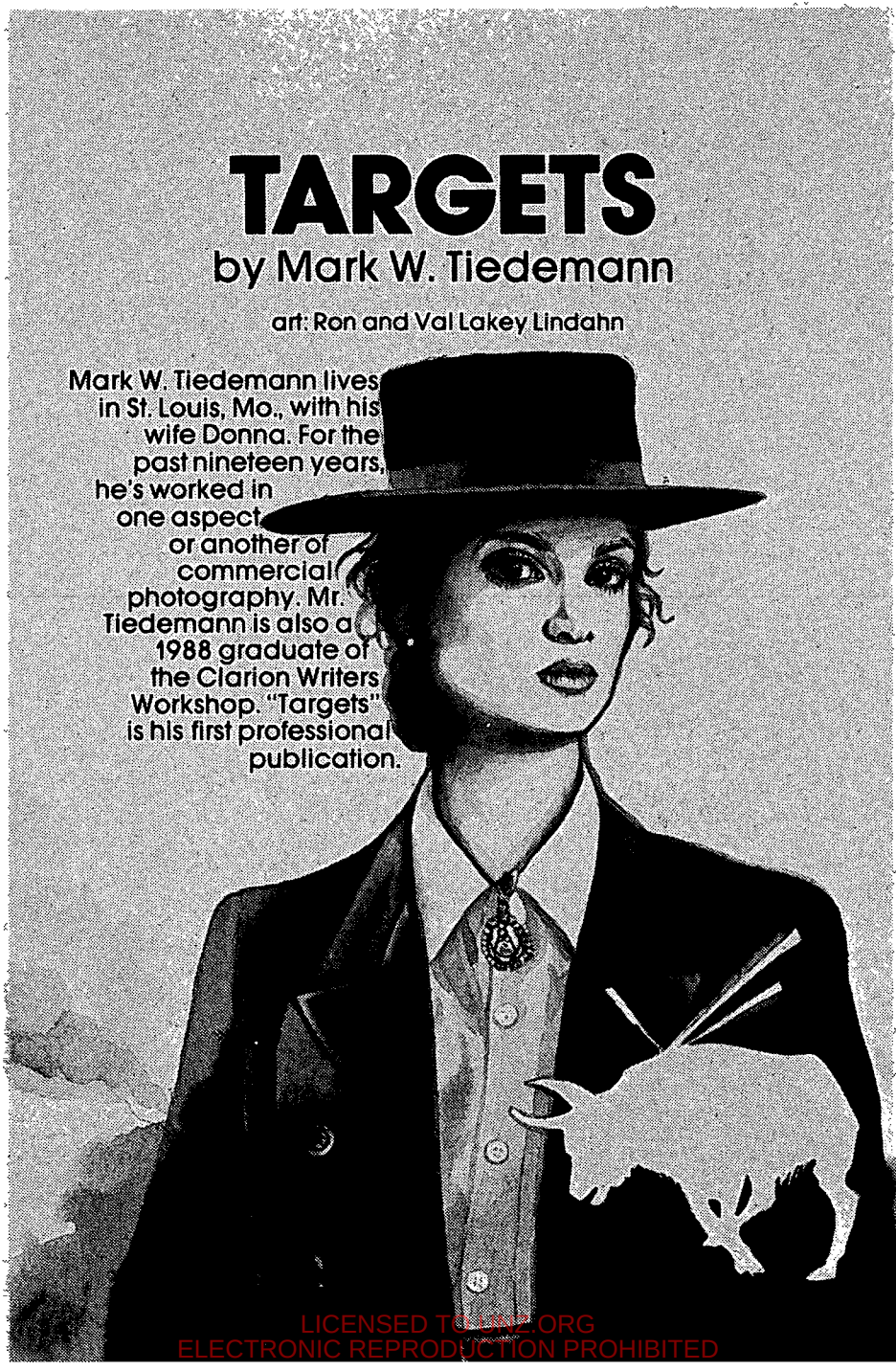
TARGETS

by Mark W. Tiedemann

art: Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn

Mark W. Tiedemann lives in St. Louis, Mo., with his wife Donna. For the past nineteen years, he's worked in one aspect or another of commercial photography. Mr. Tiedemann is also a 1988 graduate of the Clarion Writers Workshop. "Targets" is his first professional publication.



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Danielle Crissa opened the door and, smiling pleasantly, studied the stranger standing on her steps. Brilliant morning light silhouetted him. He wore a dark green cloak and an Alpine cap with a goosefeather tucked in the wide red and gold band and neither looked natural on him. The radar scan she had performed before coming downstairs to open the door showed that he was unarmed. He seemed poised to break and run down the long, narrow street and Danielle saw in his face the desire to do that more than anything else.

A hovercar drifted by, spooking the horses pulling a wagonload of logs. A band of youths, all wearing black berets with the red, white, and green symbol of the Iberian Independence Party, strode up the opposite side of the street, talking animatedly. A pair of green-uniformed police watched them from where they stood conversing with a group of tourists from Scandinavia. Children were busily handing out leaflets to everyone they met.

"I'm Dani," she said. "You are Olin?"

The man blinked, moved his left foot half a step closer, and nodded. He looked uneasily at her silk chemise and long, brown legs.

Danielle stepped aside. "Please come in. I've been expecting you."

As he stepped into her house, one of the youths across the street shouted, "*Otro cliente por la puta creida?*" The policemen excused themselves from the tourists and moved toward the young Basques. Danielle closed the door. Since the movement to bring Spain fully into the World Confederation had gained majority support, the Basques had become more visible. They had linked their cry for independence to Spanish nationalism; another shift in the political flow. Danielle sympathised a little, but she thought most of them were just trouble makers.

"Pamplona is filling up for San Fermin," she said to her guest, who stood uncertainly in the long foyer. "In a week people will be sleeping in doorways, at tables in cafes, on the streets." He frowned at her. "You've never been here for the Feria of San Fermin?"

"I'm afraid not," he said. He tried to smile. "I'm afraid I haven't traveled much at all."

Danielle cocked her head and shrugged. "Too bad. If you ever get an opportunity, come back and see it." She opened a closet door. "Go ahead and put your things in here. Then come into the living room." She walked by him down the hallway and turned left through the doorway into the living room.

Danielle sat in the highbacked wicker chair in the corner beside the single square window that looked out onto the street. She watched Olin as he entered to see what he would look at. He glanced at the hutch filled with small curios, the rack of magazines and books, and paused at the

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photograph on the wall—President Manuel Adibba of the World Confederation.

"Please, sit down," she gestured to a chair on the opposite side of the window. "Olin Staniscek, is that correct?"

He sat down stiffly and looked at her. She saw fear, suspicion, and weariness. He was middle-aged, maybe forty-five, and slim. He had a full head of graying hair and large, dark brown eyes.

"Yes," he said. "And you are . . . ?"

"Just Dani. It's short for Danielle."

He watched her for a few seconds, then looked out the window, dissatisfied.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"I'm just getting tired of dealing with people who have no last names."

"If I told you it would have no meaning anyway. For you or me. Do you have a chit?"

Olin slid his right hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a thin wafer. Danielle stood and took it from him.

"There's wine," she said, gesturing toward a dark cabinet below the portrait, "and beer and brandy. Help yourself. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She closed the door behind her and locked it, then went up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. She crossed her bedroom to another locked door and pressed her thumb against the contact. The door opened and she entered a small office. She slid the chit into a scanner, switched on her computer, and waited a few seconds for the data to display.

First an image of the man appeared on her screen and rotated 360 degrees. Then:

OLIN STANISCEK, BIOSIM CORPORATION, CONTRACT EX.OPTED 6-10-27, TRANSFER NEGOTIATED TO TOWER ENTERPRISES. STATUS PENDING. DETAIN UNTIL CONTACTED, CODE 19. TARGETED.

Danielle frowned. She touched another contact and a screen above the CRT came on. Olin sat where she had left him, staring out the window. Danielle initiated a scan sequence and waited for the results. Columns appeared on the CRT listing biological signs and metal and plastic content. She shook her head at the numbers. Too much metal and plastic. His heart rate was normal, but his temperature was high. She ran another radar scan and again found no trace of weapons. Perhaps the monitor needed servicing.

She retrieved the chit and went back downstairs. Olin was reading a pamphlet. He looked up when she entered.

"What is this?" he asked, extending the pamphlet. "One of the boys in the street handed it to me."

Danielle glanced at it. "Rules for San Fermin. The police issue these

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to let people know what kind of behavior is unacceptable. Almost anything else is."

Olin nodded. "Must be quite a festival. Sorry I'll miss it."

"It's possible you won't."

"What do you mean?"

She handed his chit back. "I'm supposed to keep you here in Pamplona until I receive word otherwise." She looked at him curiously. "Your chit doesn't say who you are or why you're defecting from Biosim."

"Is that important?"

Danielle shrugged. "If an x is going to be in my house for very long I want to know why."

"An 'x'?"

"Executive Option, defector, trade-off—x is an unknown factor. You aren't being funneled straight through the pipeline. That makes you unknown. Normally, you'd be retrieved tonight and taken to San Sebastien. Now I don't know when you're leaving. Awkward for me."

Olin shifted his gaze to the photograph. "I recognize Adibba. I didn't expect anyone working for a corporation to have political sentiments."

"How naïve. Did you give up your humanness because Biosim employed you?"

His mouth tightened into a straight line.

"You aren't going to answer my questions?"

Olin looked at her and shook his head.

"Probably just as well," Danielle said, turning away from him. "Follow me. I'll show you your room."

The first floor of her house contained four rooms. The living room, the kitchen, the dining room, and a small spare bedroom that was little more than an oversized walk-in closet. The only bathroom was on the second floor, across the hall from Danielle's bedroom. French doors opened from her bedroom onto a balcony that overlooked the street.

"I have one of the best views of the run from the balcony," she said. "I have one or two visitors every year to watch. If you're not gone by next Saturday I'll give you an identity and explain you away. Some of my friends will know better anyway."

He sighed wearily but said nothing. Danielle showed him where the food was in the kitchen.

"Has anyone ever stayed much longer than a day before?" he asked.

"No."

He waited for her to go on and when she did not he nodded and entered the small spare room.

Danielle leaned against the doorjamb, her arms folded. "I have a reputation as a courtesan in Pamplona. I'm licensed but that doesn't mean

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I practice." He raised his eyebrows at her. "Just letting you know the house rules." She straightened. "The other rule is that you do not leave without my permission. All the locks in the house are programmed for my thumbprint and the doors are boobytrapped." She smiled. "If you need anything, use the intercom above your bed. Enjoy your stay, Mr. Staniscek."

She went upstairs and dressed in loose leather pants tucked into a pair of mid-calf boots, a dark brown sweater, and a black baseball cap. She slid a long knife into the sheath sewn inside each boot. She locked the office door and went downstairs. Olin watched her leave from the door of the spare room, his face drawn with worry. Danielle locked the front door and headed north up the crowded street.

Although it was still ten days before the festival, work was already being done on the façades of the buildings where wooden planks and steel panels would be fitted in place to form a long chute down which the bulls would run, chasing runners in white muslin pants and shirts with red sashes. Madness seized Pamplona for eight days. Danielle saw people with long strings of garlic around their necks, singing in groups. Young people of all nationalities milled up and down the Estafeta and filled the square with a constant din of talk and song. Police in pairs mixed with the throngs, but no one seemed to notice them.

Danielle crossed the square to the Bar Txoco and sat down at one of the outdoor tables. She smiled. In spite of herself, she enjoyed this time of year, loved the insanity that had ruled yearly for centuries. Since retiring from the field four years ago she had lived here operating her station in relative peace.

"Señorita," the waiter said, grinning. He set a glass of wine before her. "Anchovies today?"

"No, thank you, Roberto. Have you seen Señor Vallechi?"

"He hasn't been in this morning yet, but he has been here every day for the last four at about eleven." Roberto looked at his wrist. "It's ten forty now."

"I'll wait."

A group of black-bereted militants crossed the square then. They did not actually push anyone out of the way, but only because they created a wavefront before them that caused people to step aside before they could be pushed. One of them glanced toward Danielle. His eyes widened and he spoke to his companions, pointing at her. Danielle sipped the sweet red wine and looked away, though she kept them in sight at the edge of her vision.

They lost their momentum and looked where the one pointed. There was discussion among them and the leader—at least, Danielle took him

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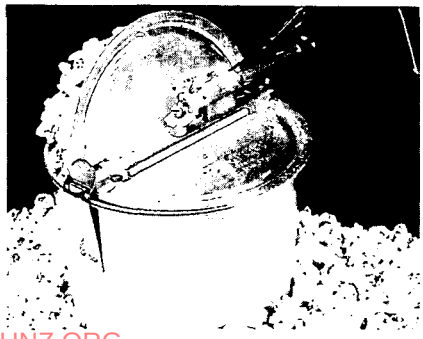

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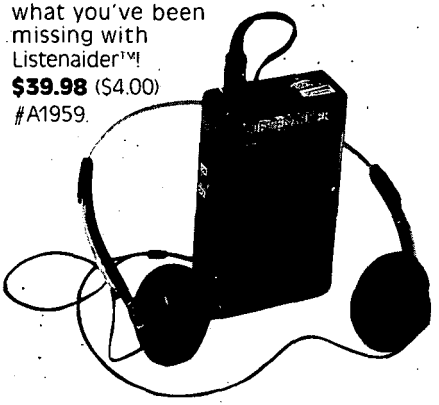

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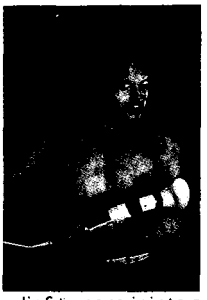

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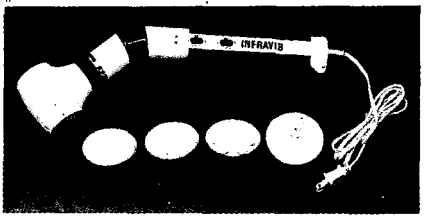

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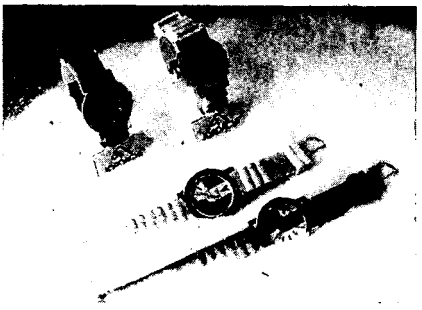

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to be the leader—scowled and shook his head. But two of them broke away from the others and advanced on her.

"Eh, Señorita Whore," the youngest said as he sat down. He spoke loudly and people looked at him, scowling. "Business done so soon?"

Danielle touched the wine glass to her lips and looked at him. "Go away, little boy," she said, "before you get lost."

His lopsided grin faltered and his fist clenched on the table. "You should leave," he said, "before you lose everything."

Roberto stepped up beside him. "Is this small dog bothering you, Señorita?"

The other Basque shoved the waiter back against a crowded table. The younger one lunged his right hand at Danielle. She shifted to the right, grabbed his hand, and slammed it against the edge of the table, then pushed down hard, bending it painfully. He winced, tried to stand. With a slight motion, Danielle broke the wine glass on the table and held the jagged remains centimeters from his left eye. He froze, staring at the sparkling glass shard.

The other militant was bent over a chair, left arm pinned high up behind his back. The compact man holding him smiled at Danielle.

"Good morning, Dani," he said softly. "How's everything going?"

"Not bad, Carlos. It may get much better, though."

Roberto shifted his gaze indignantly from one young Basque to the other, his face red with anger and embarrassment. A dozen paces away a pair of policemen watched, ready to move in if needed. Danielle smiled at them and nodded. They saluted and looked away. She looked back at her Basque.

"Go away and never speak to me again," she said. "Or I'll bite you." She leaned on his wrist a little harder and felt cartilage tear. He opened his mouth in pain, sweat beading on his pale face, but did not move. When Danielle let go he jerked away from the table, knocking the chair back into the square.

Carlos spun his man deftly and shoved him with his boot. Laughter peppered the air. Carlos turned to the onlookers and gave a low, theatrical bow.

"Roberto," he said as he retrieved the chair from the flagstones, "another glass for Señorita Danielle! What kind of a place do you run here? Broken glasses are not for drinking!"

"Si, Señor Vallechi," Roberto said, and hurried away.

The Basques were running jaggedly through the throngs.

Roberto returned with a bottle and two glasses. Carlos pulled the cork and poured. "Danielle, marry me."

She smiled. "Poor Carlos. I can't. You know me, the virgin whore. No man—"

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"—may say he owns you. Yes, I know. But I try. Forgive me."

"No need to forgive anything."

Carlos jerked his thumb back toward the square. "They're getting bolder. Adibba is really worrying them. All this talk of Spain joining the World Confederation."

Danielle shook her head. "It's only sensible. Can't they see that membership in such a government could only benefit them?"

Carlos shrugged. "They're Basques. They're used to fighting. They've been fighting for independence so long that they don't know what peace means. We've had ten years with no major civil strife, too, so they're bored. Adibba is giving them an excuse to come out and bully children and unmarried women." He grinned. "Politics is not a fit subject for San Fermin, though."

She frowned. "It's not politics, though. It's sanity. Adibba—"

Carlos held up a hand. "I know. He's your hero. I agree, I agree, I disagree, I agree. There. The debate is predetermined, just plug my answers in wherever you wish and consider it done. Drink."

She laughed as he drained half his glass. He grinned at her, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and looked at the ground. He leaned down quickly and snatched something off the stones.

"A souvenir," he said, dropping the black beret in front of her. "I'd have it thoroughly cleaned before wearing it, though, you don't know where it's been." Carlos looked around for Roberto and waved an arm. "Hey! Anchovies!"

"I need something, Carlos," Danielle said.

"Ah, a job! What can I do for you?" He tapped the side of his head theatrically. "My data base is at your disposal."

"What data do you have about any recent dealings with Biosim or Tower Enterprises?"

"Mmm, two very big places, very complex. A lot of data. Can you be more specific?"

"Defections."

Carlos shrugged dramatically, then smiled when Roberto set a platter of anchovies before him.

Carlos nibbled an anchovy, his head cocked to one side as if listening to something. Danielle wondered what it was like to wear implants like his, linked constantly to databases. They made him one of the most employed independents in the country. After several seconds he looked up.

"Half a dozen from each, at least," he said. "Most are not very important, but two production managers from the São Paolo offices of Tower broke for Biosim and one r and d man from Biosim is going the other way. I'm sure there will be a lot of resentment with both treacheries."

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"The r and d man—do you have a name? His department?"

"Staniscek. Prosthesis development." He shrugged. "Does this mean anything to you?"

"And the two from Tower?"

"Mitchell and Valasquez, weapons division."

Danielle nodded slowly. "Mitchell originally defected from Reider Corporation."

"Mmm." Carlos looked around at the crowds. "It promises to be a joyous *feria* this year, eh? You are fortunate to have a house on the Estafeta, front row seats for the *enciero,* the runs! I am jealous!"

"If I can I'll invite you this year, Carlos."

"Ah, that would be fine! But I think I'm going to run with the bulls this year. It has been a while. It's good to test your worth and do something totally insane every now and then."

"Do you take anything seriously, Carlos?"

His smile faded and the flesh between his thick eyebrows creased in concentration. "Everything, señorita. I take everything seriously." Abruptly, he laughed. "That's why I work for no one! I owe nothing to anyone but who I choose to owe something to! Or the highest bidder!" He shoved an anchovy in his mouth and washed it down whole with wine, laughed louder still, and snatched up the black beret. "I pity these children, who have chosen to enslave themselves to the false ideal of politics. They're wasting their youth on a mistress that doesn't even sleep with them. Worse than working for a corporation." He looked around. "Roberto! Cheese!"

Danielle entered her house and paused, listening to the silence. She frowned and walked quietly back to Olin's room. She tossed the black beret onto the kitchen table. As she neared, she could hear faint buzzings and an occasional highpitched beep. Carefully, she pushed open his door.

Olin sat on the edge of the bed, stripped to his underwear, his right foot propped on the canebacked chair. The flesh was smooth, hairless, and a perfect uniform color. Danielle thought she saw a sheen, like dull plastic, highlighting the thigh and shin. But her eyes were drawn instantly to the knee. A round section had been removed and within the hole she saw a webwork of tubes, wires, and metal-colored parts. Olin touched a stylus to a point within it and read the result on a small instrument in his left hand.

Danielle felt herself tremble for an instant. She scanned the rest of his body. Except for a segment of his upper chest and the front of his neck and his head, he was the same color all over, the same smoothness, hairless and shining dully like plastic.

He looked up then. His eyes widened and he quickly, very quickly, set

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aside the instrument, retrieved the cap from beside him on the bed, and slapped it in place over the open joint, stood, and donned a robe.

"Prosthetics . . . " Danielle breathed.

Olin blushed deeply and chewed on his lower lip. His eyes narrowed at her with open mistrust. Danielle frowned.

"Everything?" she asked.

Hesitantly, he nodded. "Except my head, lungs, stomach and intestines, limbic system, things like that." He looked away as if ashamed. "Little variation the last war created, Gravid Myasthenia. I, uh . . . "

"Your specialty is prosthetics," Danielle said, "but I had no idea the art was so advanced."

"Well, so far I'm the only one walking around with this much replacement." He looked at her again. "Look, uh, what are you going to do? I mean—"

Danielle entered the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Don't worry, I'm not working for a competitor. You're still going down the pipeline when word comes." She waved at the chair. "Sit."

She studied him, acutely aware of her fascination and its inappropriateness, yet unwilling to set it aside.

"It's not easy to live with disease," she said. "But I'm not sure it would be any easier to do . . . this." She indicated his body.

Olin almost smiled, but it was a broken motion of the mouth, cynical and harsh. "Lie awake sometime feeling the energy drain out of parts of your body, knowing in the morning one less thing will function for you. A finger, a hand, a toe . . . dead tissue." He blushed again and looked away. "Sorry."

"How easy is this?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't have much choice."

"I mean, could you do it for someone else?"

He frowned at her. After a long pause, he said, "I'm not sure I would want to. Why?"

Danielle stood. "What would you like for dinner? I'm getting hungry."

"Uh—oh, I don't eat very much."

"I imagine not. But when you do, what do you like?"

Olin managed a shy smile this time. "I always had a fondness for lasagna."

Danielle smiled back. "I think I can manage that."

"I was diagnosed with the disease when I was twenty," he said. He pushed his plate away, more than half the slice of lasagna still on it, and raised his wine glass to his mouth. "At that time I was still at university, studying neurology. They gave me four years."

"So you changed your field of learning?"

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"Not at first. I thought I could find a cure. I worked on it for almost a year. That's when the first major impairments occurred." He frowned. "It really is a frightening disease. Overnight you lose control of something. I lost my left foot and two fingers on my left hand one night. That scared me. Over the next year I developed most of the techniques for the prosthetic replacements I ended up testing on myself. Biosim became interested and made me an offer—carte blanche in return for the marketing rights. I didn't really care about that, I just wanted to live. Biosim was a greater resource than the university."

"Was it difficult?"

"As opposed to what? Dying?"

Danielle raised her eyebrows and sipped her wine. Careful, she cautioned herself, but even while she thought it she felt caught, involved.

"The hardware has been around for a long time," he said. "But not the method of linking it perfectly to the nerve net. My breakthrough was developing that link, that's all. What about you?" he asked. "Why are you here doing this?"

"I'm waiting for the revolution," she said. He laughed and she smiled. "This is more acceptable than some things I've done for the company. I've worked for Tower Enterprises for almost ten years. When Adibba manages to unite the world, then maybe I can do something else."

"You're very serious about that, aren't you?"

She nodded. "I knew Manuel Adibba once. A long time ago, before I left Argentina. He's one of the few genuinely kind people I've ever met."

"You don't honestly believe he can do everything he says he wants to, do you?"

She shrugged. "The attempt is still worthy of respect."

Olin took the black beret from where it hung on an empty chair. "What about these people? Spain isn't the only country with separatists, isolationists."

Danielle nodded slowly, staring at the beret. "The problem with those labels is they aren't solely political." She drew a deep breath and stood. "Did you enjoy your dinner?"

Startled, Olin looked at his plate. "Oh—yes, it was excellent. I said I didn't eat very much . . . "

She picked up the plates and went to the sink. Methodically, thinking about nothing, she loaded the dishwasher, cleaned off the rest of the table, put things back in the refrigerator. Olin stood a few feet away from the table, awkwardly holding his wineglass, watching her with a worried pout on his face, as if he felt he had done something wrong but did not know what.

"Uh . . . how did you come to be in this position?" he asked.

Danielle gathered together the crumbs on the table and brushed them

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into her hand. "I was recruited. The same as you. My employers gave me a variety of jobs until this one came along. I seem suited to it."

"Why Pamplona?"

"It's an excellent place for this sort of thing," she said, dropping the crumbs into a waste basket. She washed her hands in the sink. "Every year the festival draws people from all over the world. It's all very confusing, law is relaxed, people are less vigilant. A lot of business gets done here. You might be surprised."

"Are you happy?"

Any other question might have allowed her to continue talking superficially, automatically. She stopped, though, and looked at him as if he had just now appeared in her house. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him, learning the contours and shadings of his stranger's face. The certainty that she did not know him, had never seen him before, was a recognition in itself. The experience was familiar. She thought of Argentina and Brazil, before she was recruited. Memory touched memory, opened, other faces fitted like templates over his, now an enemy, now a—not a friend, there had been none, but the closest she could find in a war-eroded community of dirty hovels, migrant mercenaries, and shifting objectives. The man who had always come to sleep with her mother had protected her until she was old enough for him to want. The woman who had trained the children in guerilla tactics had protected her from him until her own man had wanted her. Shifting faces, shifting loyalties, shifting outcomes. The raid in which she had been captured and sent to São Paolo and the labs and the men and women, dozens of faces, who had touched her and changed her and sent her back to the hills to kill with her touch, her love, unknowing at first, incurable. The manmade disease isolated her from even that most fundamental of human distractions. Trust became impossible. She fought well, she killed for the cause, the revolution, but no one wanted her, no one trusted her with kind words and friendships. The faces of the enemy became everyone's face. There were enemies one killed and enemies one tolerated. Under such recognition trust died before it could be born and with it all possibility of happiness.

"Are you happy?" someone else had asked then.

The face of the foreign mercenary, come to show them new weapons, take them on a more important raid, clouded by a smile and warm eyes, and his question caught her by surprise. He had probably misread her blank stare, her lack of response. He had laughed and told her about a wider world and a brighter future for her talents—if she lived through the raid. She had been the only one to escape. Later, she understood that all her comrades had been used as decoys for some other purpose, but the loss had not touched her. She wanted to leave, go where she was not

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known, do things she would, in Brazil, in Argentina, in Chile, in Peru, never do. But it was still killing and never trusting. Variety paled and all that was left was a desire for a certain anonymity, a place apart from decisions of trust, death, friendship. Happiness had never been a question. Only peace.

The gallery of faces ended and she was left staring at Olin Staniscek with an intensity that clearly frightened him. She could not remember another face or a name of anyone she had shunted through this house. It occurred to her then that she might be ordered to kill him. The thought made her shudder. She drew a breath and looked away.

"I didn't mean . . : " he said.

"What are you running from?" she asked. "What is it Biosim wanted you to do that made it impossible for you to work for them again? That made it worth risking your life to defect to another corporation?"

He winced and looked away. "You wouldn't understand."

"Maybe. I've had over a hundred defectors through this house and I've never wanted to ask that before. I've been comfortable here. Not happy—comfortable. I think I prefer it that way. You're the first one that hasn't left in twenty-four hours. I'm not very comfortable with that."

Olin nodded. "I apologize for the inconvenience."

Danielle laughed softly, shook her head. "Tell me something. If you could go anywhere in the world, anywhere at all, where would you go?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure there is any such place that I'd like to go there rather than anywhere else."

She sat down at the table. "I would like to go home myself."

"And where is that?"

"I don't know. I never found it."

Danielle stared at her hands where they rested on the tabletop. She heard a chair chitter briefly on the floor. Then another hand covered her right one. She looked up, startled, to see Olin watching her, his face composed of equal parts of fear and concern.

"I can't trust you," she said.

He shrugged and smiled lopsidedly. Danielle turned her hand over and curled her fingers around his. The skin was a little too smooth, a little too dry, and perhaps a bit too warm. She liked it anyway.

The next day Olin surprised her by cooking a gourmet dinner. The following day he taught her chess, a game she had never had time to learn. The day after that he helped her clean house.

Danielle felt uneasy with herself. She watched Olin as he did things for her, talked to her, treated her in ways she could not remember being treated before. Part of her was wary, warning her to stop it before she grew accustomed to it. But she did not know how. She realized that she

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had lost control and her only defense was in not letting Olin know it, too.

In the streets the preparations for San Fermin became more evident. Tall mannequins were constructed and fitted with fireworks; the barricades that protected the fronts of the buildings all along the Estafeda were hurried to completion; each day hundreds of tourists arrived. Danielle caught herself looking at all the foreign faces with anxiety. Among them she expected to see the contact that would tell her what to do with Olin. When she understood this, she knew also that if she had to kill him she might not be able to.

The black bereted Basques were more evident, too. Signs were posted throughout Pamplona protesting Manuel Adibba's attempts to bring Spain fully into the World Confederation. The *Guardia Civil* tolerated them until the day they beat three Swedish nationals in the square. Danielle saw the blood on the cobblestones and broken glass from the window of a cafe. The assailants were arrested and the next day the police had tripled in number and the posters advocating Spanish independence were torn down. At night posters were nailed back up and in the morning the police tore them down again. The festive mood of the city soured. People still arrived daily, laughter was still the most common human sound, but there was a nervousness to it now that set Danielle even more on edge.

The bulls arrived on Monday, two days before the start of the *feria,* and Danielle went to the ancient *Corales de Gas* to see them. Proud Salamancas snorted at the smaller Andalusians as they milled about in the pens. Occasionally one would charge across its ground, grinding to a halt after a few aggressive strides, to look around and realize there was nothing to attack.

Danielle went back to her house, thinking of the Basques.

Carlos sat on her front steps, holding a torn poster. He looked up at her and scowled and shook the paper.

"Young idiots think they can turn back progress with this garbage! Ah!" He crumpled it up and tossed it into the street. "I found that on your door. It was addressed to *Señorita Puta.* I think I'm growing annoyed with Navarra." He spat on the sidewalk. "I came to tell you one of your visitors has arrived."

She frowned. "I think I'm not having anyone over this time, Carlos." She stepped up to the door. "Things . . . are different."

Carlos raised his eyebrows. "Your guest is still here? Mmm, interesting. But this visitor has already paid me to make sure he is invited to your house." He sighed. "I suppose that means I do not get to come watch the run with you either? I'm not going to run every day, after all."

Danielle smiled. "I'll make an exception for you, Carlos."

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"Ah, gracias! Have you been down to see the bulls?"

"Yes. Just now."

"Some scrawny ones this year. A couple Miuras look good, though." He grinned. "I'll be back early Wednesday morning. What time will you be up?"

"Four." She touched her thumb to the lock and the door clicked open. "I'll see you then, Carlos."

He nodded, bowed, and went off up the street. Danielle watched him go, wondering who had arrived. It would be odd to have the house so empty this year.

Danielle turned to enter her home. She was struck full in the back and air exploded from her lungs as she staggered through the doorway and landed on the floor. She heard feet hurrying into the house behind her. The door slammed shut. She began to push up. Someone grabbed her hair and shoved her aside, against the wall. She shook her head and tried to sit up. A backhand caught her cheek and she was pulled to a sitting position.

"Find Staniscek," someone said tightly.

She opened her eyes and looked into the face of a young man, his eyes the same black as his hair, glistening. Beyond him she caught the movement of another man moving by, toward the living room.

His hand was tangled in her hair and he thrust her head back into the wall. Her teeth banged together and her eyes disfocused for a second.

"What do you want?" she heard from the next room—Olin's voice, she was sure—and then the stone-in-mud smack of fist striking flesh. A body slammed against a wall; Danielle listened to it slide to the floor, cut by the sound of glass breaking.

"Eh, we have some things to do," the man—boy, really, now that she looked closer—snapped at her. She frowned and recognized him then from the square, a week past.

Danielle regarded him from a cold place inside, studied him like a problem in mechanics, the way his body was proportioned, his weight, height, demeanor. She analyzed the way he held her hair, tightly and leaning forward to press her head against the wall, how his overall balance was affected by this awkward stance, and derived a solution to the problem. She smiled lightly, suggestively, and, after a moment, he responded. His grip relaxed, he leaned fractionally closer.

She dropped her body lower down the wall, a dozen small pains over her scalp as hair tore out in his hand. She brought her right leg up in a clean arc to connect with his butt and drove him into the wall above her. He released her hair to catch himself. She slid lower, then shot her right hand straight up into his throat, putting her shoulder into the

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punch. He spun sideways, gagging, and fell to the floor, clutching his throat. Blood ran from the corner of his mouth; his face darkened quickly.

Danielle jumped up and pulled the knife from her boot. She reached the doorway to the living room as the second man stepped out. His eyes widened momentarily, then he looked past her to where his companion lay choking on the floor.

Danielle drove the knife, edge upward, in just above his groin. He buckled slightly and grunted, surprised. Danielle gripped the knife with both hands and pulled, ripping through his abdomen up to his sternum, where the blade caught on the breastbone. Blood spattered the floor, her forearms. His face contorted in rage for an instant. She pushed him backward with one hand just enough to withdraw the knife. She stepped aside and he fell face down, blood spreading beneath him.

She turned to the other one. His face was blue and he convulsed, coughing small ineffectual coughs. As she watched he stiffened, shook for several seconds, then relaxed.

In the living room Olin lay on the floor by the liquor cabinet. The portrait had fallen beside him. Danielle checked his breathing and the pulse in his neck and exhaled in relief.

He was lighter than she expected. She was able to pull him out of the living room and down the hallway to his room. She propped him against his bed, straddled him and got a grip under his arms, and heaved him up onto the mattress. Her arms shook from the effort. She lowered him back and then put his legs up.

She checked his head carefully for fractures, but found nothing other than a lump starting on the crown. His pupils were not dilated, his face did not feel clammy, but she covered him up anyway. There was no telling what would be proper treatment for him in case of concussion.

She closed his door and studied the two corpses on the floor. After a few minutes, she went into the kitchen. From the spice rack she pulled a bottle of stim pills and downed two of them, then cleaned her knife in the sink and slid it back into its sheath. Then she pulled out four large plastic trash bags and a ball of twine.

She tied their hands and feet, then pushed their legs up against their chests and wrapped string around thighs, back, and knees to bind each of them into as compact a shape as possible. She opened the bags and worked them over the bodies, two bags for each body.

After that she mopped up as much blood as she could. By now she was covered in it. She cleaned it off the bags, then poured a strong bleach on the floor.

She undressed there in the hallway and put her bloodsoaked clothes in a fifth trash bag. She went upstairs and showered. She pulled on an old jumpsuit and stepped out onto the balcony. She leaned on the railing

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and carefully scanned the street and the windows of the buildings across from her. She saw no one watching, waiting, no one who looked even fractionally out-of-place.

In her office she keyed the household monitors and scanned for any electronic signals that did not belong there. There was one, in the kitchen. She grimaced and went downstairs. The black beret was still on the table. After studying it carefully, she found the transmitter in the fabric of the emblem. She threw it in the bag with her bloody clothes.

She sponged her boots clean and pulled them back on. She opened the rear door and went out into the weed-overgrown backyard. A high wood-plank fence surrounded the narrow yard. At the alley gate she looked up and down the dirt and gravel avenue for observers. No one.

In the basement she kept a handtruck, which she brought into the hallway. She strapped one bag on and rolled it through the house, to the back door, and outside.

She dragged the dolly to the gate through the forest of weeds. Large bees bobbed from one flower to another. A dozen yards down the deeply-rutted alley was the block incinerator, a huge, truncated cone with a wide hole half a meter above the ground. Danielle hauled the truck and bag down the uneven dirt to the hopper and muscled the bag over the edge. She saw the flash of the beam as she turned away and scanned the fences for nosey neighbors. She still saw no one and returned for the second bag. Along with that she also threw away the bag with her clothes and the beret.

In the house, the odor of bleach and blood hung strongly in the air. She mopped the patch again. The bleach had taken some of the color from the wood, but there was no more blood. She drew a pail of water and scrubbed it some more to make sure, checked the walls for spots and cleaned those, too, then put everything away. She rummaged through a closet until she found an old turkish carpet that had not been used in years. She spread it over the spot.

Finally, satisfied that she had done everything possible, she went back to Olin. He was still unconscious and now he was warm to the touch.

The question remained who they had worked for. Biosim, she decided. They either wanted him back or wanted him dead. In any case she was expendable.

Danielle sat down beside him and watched him. She did not know how long she had been crying before she noticed that her face was wet.

She woke to the sound of knocking, then recognized that it was someone pounding on the door. Olin had not moved. She rubbed sleep from her eyes and stood. The pounding came again.

Danielle went upstairs and opened a drawer under her bed. She re-

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moved a flechette pistol, closed the drawer, and hefted it in her right hand. It was dull blue-black and slightly larger than her palm. She tucked it in her belt at the small of her back and went downstairs.

Carlos grinned when she opened the door. "Good morning, my friend! I thought I would come early. I've brought someone who says you want to see him."

Behind Carlos was a taller man, watching her with a faint smile, a leather jacket held by a thumb over his left shoulder, almost concealing the shoulderbag that hung at his hip.

It would be easy to shoot him now, Danielle thought. "You're here to pick up a parcel?"

He shook his head. "I'm here to cancel the shipment."

Carlos stepped through the door, past her. Danielle looked beyond the newcomer to where workmen were erecting the barricades over storefronts for tomorrow morning's run.

"May I come in?" he asked.

Danielle moved aside to let him pass. She turned as he entered, closed the door, and watched him examine the walls and walk down the hallway.

"What happened?" Carlos called from the living room. The stranger looked through the doorway. Danielle stepped up beside him to see Carlos kneeling at the broken portrait. He looked up at her. "Your Adibba? I think I can repair it . . . "

The stranger stepped away. Three long strides took him down the hall to the kitchen. Danielle watched him study it through the door, then turn, reach for Olin's door, and open it.

"This *is* my house," she said sharply. "Ask before you poke your nose into anything else."

Startled, he looked at her blankly. His eyes narrowed for an instant, then an amused smirk tugged at his mouth for another instant. Finally, he shook his head and entered Olin's room.

Danielle followed. He stood over Olin, who was still unconscious.

"This the parcel?" he asked. "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know. He fell and hurt himself."

The man shrugged. "If he stays this way that'll make it simpler." He turned to her. "I have a few days. Carlos tells me you have an excellent view of the run."

"Why is the shipment canceled?"

Again, he shrugged. "Things change. I think the two parties involved have come to other arrangements. Besides, I'm here to get you out, too. It's been decided to close this station. We're pretty certain you've been compromised." He squeezed by her and went into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of Dos Equis. "Where's the bedroom?"

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"Upstairs. What am I supposed to do after the station is closed?"

"I suspect they're returning you to active field duty."

He snapped off the cap on the bottle and raised it to his mouth. After a long draft, he left the kitchen and went up the stairs.

Carlos stood in the hallway, arms folded, watching.

"Charming," he said.

"What has changed, Carlos?" she asked.

"The word is that Tower and Biosim have signed an agreement. For the time being there is peace between them. In exchange for certain properties, certain markets." He frowned. "You look very tired, Danielle."

"Properties," she whispered and looked at Olin. She nodded. "I am, Carlos."

She smiled thinly at him and went upstairs.

He had the television on, though he stood in the doorway to the balcony, looking down the street. Danielle started to say something, then stared at the television.

"—panic here in Reykjavik as people are trying to find out exactly what has happened," the announcer spoke frantically over a scene of a crowd gathered around something in their midst. Black uniformed World Confederation police mingled thickly with them. "But the word is that Manuel Adibba has been shot, possibly killed. Repeat, President Manuel Adibba has been shot. We're attempting to confirm his status."

"About time," the stranger said. "I expected somebody to blow him away years ago." He turned toward the room, the remote in his hand, and turned the set off. He smiled at Danielle. "I like this. Carlos says your cover is a prostitute. Is it all just cover?"

She blinked at him. For a moment her mind filled with an image of Adibba from the time she had met him, briefly, when he had only been president of Brazil. He had shut down the illegal labs, one of which had altered Danielle, and had done what he could to make it impossible for the corporations to operate as freely as they had. She remembered thinking that she had never before met anyone who actually cared about other people.

The memory vanished and she saw only the man standing before her, holding a beer, waiting for her answer. The one image occluded the other and Danielle found it difficult to see how this one could be the more powerful.

"It's a cover for the locals," she heard herself say, "but for coworkers . . . " She closed the door behind her.

It took three days for Danielle's disease to work on him. Though it had been years since she had seen it, all the symptoms passed before her

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view with striking familiarity, as if her last victim had been only a week ago.

Carlos watched the *enciero* with them on the first day. The run was vicious and a man was trampled by a bull. Danielle wondered why she loved the run so much. It was senseless, a pointless charge for the bulls who ended up by the end of the day dead at the hands of a matador.

The second day Carlos ran with the bulls. The company man scoffed at the insanity of the run, drank his beer, and slept the rest of the morning.

The third day he was feverish, anxious, filled with energy.

"I think I'm going to try that tomorrow," he declared, pointing at the runners in their white clothes and red sashes. He looked at her and smiled. "What do you think?"

"If you can pull yourself away from bed, why not?"

He laughed, finished his beer, then went to sleep.

Carlos came that afternoon. Wordlessly, she showed him the body. He said nothing during the time it took to wrap it up in trash bags and carry it downstairs.

"Does this mean you resign from your job?" he asked afterward.

Danielle looked into Olin's room. His fever had broken. He shifted when she touched him. She still did not know if he would live.

"What now?" Carlos asked.

She thought, it's time to fight my own war now. She said, "We'll have to leave Pamplona."

He nodded. "I know some people in Roncevalles. Perhaps we can keep you safe in the mountains."

She nodded. "Olin, too, Carlos."

"Of course."

After midnight they took the body down the alley to the incinerator.

In the morning Danielle left Pamplona. ●

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The quietly terrifying story of "The House on Cemetery Street" (December 1982) was Cherry Wilder's last tale for *Asfm*. She returns to our pages with a haunting ooke of...

A WOMAN'S RITUAL

by Cherry Wilder

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Between Breitbach and Kirchenfeld there is a country road, ambling between flat, sedgy fields. A turn-off, not much more than a cart track, leads to the Heidenhof, a very old farm with cavernous stone barns clustered around a paved yard. Most of its land was sold off after the war; a large cottage of the local red stone, standing among its own trees half a kilometer away, went through many hands before Jutta and Michael managed to get the lease.

They mended the roof and cultivated the garden. Now and then, young people from the city came out to stay with them, to live the good life, eat organic vegetables, and observe the frogs in the biotope. It was hard work at first: Michael was an out-of-work social worker and Jutta . . . there were even more of her sort. . . . was an out-of-work teacher. In the beginning, they didn't know one end of a spade from the other, but Michael, a tall, craggy man aged nearly forty, was very determined. He had been trying to get a job for too many years. Now he had a personal challenge and he was still working circumspectly in his chosen vocation.

Jutta, his girl, was a tower of strength. She quickly got over the stages of trying to weave or make saleable pots, but she had a green thumb with the herbs, and was the only person far and wide who could milk the nanny-goat. They worked in the bean-rows or dug drains to the tune of an old prisoners' song from the Spanish Civil War: *"Wir sind die Moor Soldaten . . ." We are the peat-bog soldiers . . . we march with our spades to the marsh.* It was a song not only of resignation but of hope.

The young visitors from Frankfurt were on drugs; they came to take a voluntary cure at the Greenhope Commune, which for this purpose received a small state subsidy. There were never more than two of them at a time, usually young couples who had no one but each other. Family, friends, all had gone—ahead loomed only the agonizing round of fixing, hustling, stealing, dealing; the endstation was an overdose. Greenhope was worth a try; sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

In the fifth summer, their old friend Klaus was in residence, still clean, and he had brought along his girlfriend, Elfie. She had tried Greenhope with him once before and run away after a week. Now Klaus begged Michael to take her back. He sketched in the trouble he had had finding Elfie and dragging her out of the concrete jungle and back to the land. Elfie was in appalling shape. The only thing positive to be said about her was that she was still not positive.

Jutta went out with a drink of apple juice. She found the girl sitting by the gate in the long grass, shivering in the midday heat. She was grey-faced, her blonde hair was dun-colored with dirt and sweat. She had stripped off a baggy khaki overall belonging to Klaus. Now all she had on besides her down-at-heel boots was a grimy red satin bra and panties

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and a black lace garter belt. She was skeletally thin, and her flesh had a horrid pallor. She looked like a reject from *The Rocky Horror Show.*

Jutta fed her the apple juice, and they sat looking out across the ancient grey-green meadows and the small stands of corn and rye. A hawk hung in the air, and then stooped upon its prey in the ripening grain. They saw Beck, the farmer, drive his tractor into his yard; his booming voice came to them on the wind. Frau Beck emerged from the barn in her *kittel,* a sleeveless floral overall, the housewives' uniform.

"We saw the old boy as we came in," said Elfie in her rough whisper. "My God, what sort of people *are* they?"

"*Bauern,*" said Jutta.

Farmers, peasants. The word was the same.

"They don't bother us," Jutta added. "Old Beck is really not quite right in the head."

She felt badly about it sometimes . . . the weirdness of the Becks suited the Greenhopers only too well. A respectable, nosy family in the Heidenhof might have raised objections.

Beck was a terrible-looking man, a paunchy figure between sixty and seventy, with a huge head and pendulous cheeks. He dressed in antiquated folk costume: a green felt hat with a feather; collarless woolen jackets, thick as felt and embroidered with flowers; grey breeches buttoned under the knees; gaiters; an oilskin cape, or a long loden overcoat in winter.

He talked to himself constantly, shouted at anyone else within range, bawling out awful jokes. When he came into the small grocer's shop on the way into Breitbach, everyone cringed. He rolled around nudging the housewives.

"My grandma lived to ninety-one!" he hooted. "Killed the pig for her own funeral! Fell down making blood-sausage! How does that affect you, eh? Eh?"

According to Frau Gunther, the grocer's wife, Beck distilled his own potato schnapps in the barn. A harmless crank? Whenever she saw his wife, though, Jutta was not so sure. Frau Beck was a pitiable sight. She was the farmer's second wife, more than twenty years younger than her husband, fat, sallow, and blank-faced. She would trail after him into the shop, wearing leather clogs and an old overcoat. Once or twice a year, they went to the Breitbach cemetery, or to church in the village of Kirchenfeld. Very occasionally, the farmer's only son and his family drove up in a red Mercedes. Then lights burned all night in the farmhouse, and voices were raised, but not in song. Once the ambulance came out at Christmas, threading its way down the snowy track. Later, Jutta had seen Frau Beck wearing glasses, to cover up a black eye.

Only the other day, Beck had accosted Michael as he was crossing the

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summer fields. It was at a place where the land lay in heavy ridges, beside a stone marker and a wizened pear tree.

"A fool, that's me, a fool!" shouted Beck. "Only a fool would marry a second wife, eh, boy?"

Beck had carefully marked out a series of oblong plots on the ridges and was preparing to dig.

"What d'ya think *those* are?" he cried joyfully. "Just what they look like! Room for the whole family!"

Jutta found herself keeping an eye on the Heidenhof, watching for Frau Beck to see that she continued in good health.

Elfie was still shivering; Jutta draped the overall around her, and the two girls went into the cottage. For long days and nights, they all took turns sitting with Elfie, feeding her their herbal concoctions, cleaning up the mess. Their therapy included music cassettes and hot blanket packs. Often they led the patient out of doors: nights under the last summer moon, they sat watching the fields. On the railway line behind the house, the long trains racketed through, crossing the continent to Paris, Vienna, Berlin.

Klaus was a chunky blond boy, resolutely cheerful; in fact, he was really restless and sad. He was a physical type, Michael explained, and must *work* off his depression. He went moonlighting, and helped old Beck bring in the harvest for small cash payments. He had to endure midday dinner in the farmhouse kitchen more than once, and painted a somber picture of the Becks' domestic life. Horrible old Willi rapping on the table for his soup . . . they always had soup of some kind, with bread and sausage. Minna Beck, poor cow, kept the old place spotless, but got no thanks for it.

There *was* something interesting, Klaus said eagerly to Elfie who, ages ago, had studied archaeology in college. Beck was excavating those plots on the ridge systematically, looking for buried treasure. He had already found some ancient coins, and a kind of brooch, which he kept in a jar on the kitchen mantelpiece. Swore it was gold. No, it wasn't Beck's own idea: people from a local museum had put him on to it. There had been a marsh—in fact, a peat-bog—on that site once which preserved bones and other artifacts. The water-level underground had altered, the ridged land had been left high and dry.

When Elfie, who had turned back into a slim nervous blonde girl with roses in her cheeks, admitted interest, Michael kept the talk going on archeology. He knew that it was touch and go for Elfie now. She was over the worst, but could slip back at any moment. Time for occupational therapy. Jutta sighed, plaiting together strings of onions; autumn had come. Here she was with Michael, snug in their house with the Tibetan scrolls and the big new stereo cassette player, and suddenly she wished

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that they were somewhere else. On an island. In the mountains. In Paris, Milan, wherever the trains might carry them.

A week later, Klaus went down to the farm to pick up his pay, and came back at the double. In the last plot, Beck had come upon a grave. Michael was in Frankfurt, running the gauntlet at the Social Services Department, but Jutta and Elfie ran out into the fields. It was midday; the sun was just drying the frost from the grass. A canvas screen about a meter high had been erected round the site. Beck had already dug too deep; there was a man from the museum directing the farmer now and passing the earth from the pit through a sieve.

The topsoil, grey and dusty, had given way to dark strata, almost black.

"Wood!" whispered Elfie.

There was a dull sound; Beck drew back as the dark layer cracked across and fell inwards.

"Quickly!" said the man from the museum. "Must lift it off!"

Klaus went to help. The thick plates of dark stuff that the men lifted aside had a suggestion of dressed logs. Overhead a pair of crows cried out hoarsely, and a flock of the huge black birds rose from the stubble fields. Elfie gripped Jutta by the arm. In the shallow pit lay a human skeleton; white dust from the excavation powdered the blackened bones. Jutta was overwhelmed with grief and shame. *We have opened a grave . .* she thought.

"Ha-ha!" boomed Beck. "We found the fellow! We've got him at last!"

Elfie spoke up unexpectedly. "How do you know it's a man?"

"Don't talk rubbish, girlie!" roared the farmer. "Look at those boots. Would a woman be wearing boots?"

The boots, marvelously preserved, reached to the knee. Jutta and Elfie looked down and laughed aloud. They both wore boots, just as sturdy.

"You could be right!" panted the man from the museum. "No guarantee that it's a man. Have to check the pelvis. There was another case . . . "

With the help of Klaus, he covered the grave with cloth and with canvas, then rushed for the Becks' telephone. Everything must be taken out and carried away at once, even if it meant working round the clock. Dear God, if there was a shower of rain, a thunderstorm. Jutta and Elfie walked back up to the cottage and kept peering out at the activity. A ring of lights flowered in the dusk; as darkness fell, it looked like an encampment in the meadows. When Michael drove home in their old VW after a hard day battling the bureaucracy, Jutta came rushing out to him through the garden.

"What's going on? There was a police car at the end of the track."

"Oh, it's a terrible thing!" said Jutta. "They dug up a grave!"

"Ssh . . . for a moment I thought . . . "

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Michael had thought that one of their people was in trouble with the police . . . Elfie perhaps, or Klaus, or some previous visitor.

"Anyway, that's not so terrible by the sound of things," he said cheerfully. "A marvelous find!"

They went into the house and talked about it over the zucchini cake. The grave looked more Celtic than anything else, Elfie said. Not from the La Tene period, pure Celtic. About 1500 years old, she would say, Celto-Roman. Oh yes, pagan most likely. Perhaps some kind of cult burial out in the peat-bog, for a special person. Trees were sacred to them, and water; they had sacred birds and animals. No one knew the true names of their gods and goddesses. Tres Matres, the Three Mothers, for instance—who knew what they were really called?

Everyone went to bed except Jutta. She kept vigil until the lighted cortège drove away down the track and the last light went off in the Heidenhof. Now all was still; no trains passed; sounds of the night were muted. An owl was calling in their own trees. A wind sprang up and rattled bare branches on the roof. Strong gusts struck at the cottage; in the light of the moon, which rose late, she could see the grass and trees bending. The nanny-goat began to bleat and fuss in her stall, the hens were noisy. The wind was very strong, coming in waves across the fields, and it was full of howling voices. Then it dropped as suddenly as it had come. Jutta saw a faint cluster of lights at the grave. Was anyone still there? She thought of lanterns, or reflectors set up round a building site. No, she had imagined the lights; the moon had caught a patch of frost or a piece of metal.

Beck was madder than ever after his discovery. He was being paid compensation and he was supposed to keep quiet about the archeological find, but the effort was too great. He hinted and boasted. His son, Udo, with the red Mercedes, came over from Mainz with the wife and children and stayed for several nights. Udo Beck met Michael on the track, and told him to be sure that no Anti-Social Elements stole treasure from the Becks' land. There were no animals at the Heidenhof any more, not even dogs, but Udo had brought a pig to be slaughtered.

On the night of the Schlachtfest, there was a terrible fight. Jutta saw dark figures running out of the yard; even the children were out there, throwing stones. Their quarry ran silently, stumbling over the frosty grass. With a thrill of horror, Jutta saw that they were all chasing Minna Beck, the stepmother.

Beck, bellowing with rage, pulled away from the pack and ran ahead, striking at his wife with something that could have been a straw broom. His cries had woken everyone in the cottage. They peered out without

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putting on the lights. Beck had left his victim lying in the grass and was staggering noisily back to his own yard.

"Come on!" said Jutta firmly to Elfie.

Michael knew better than to interfere; he and Klaus made themselves scarce. The two girls scrambled into their boots and slung on coats over their night clothes. They found Frau Beck still crouching half-stunned in the grass, and brought her into the cottage. Elfie made tea while Jutta bathed the woman's face in warm water and dabbed arnica on her bruises. It was as if they all knew their parts in the scene . . . it had become a woman's ritual. *Get away from him. What if he hurts you badly? Is there somewhere you can go? Try the Frauenhaus. No, no, it's the drink. And the relations make it worse. One day I'll clear out, go back to my people, in Hanau.*

Frau Beck was hollow-eyed, passive, hopeless. They gave her an old raincoat to put on over her torn blouse and skirt. She did not go back to the farmhouse again until sunrise. Jutta and Elfie saw her off at the garden gate. Long rays of light came over the roof of the Heidenhof; the dark trudging figure of the farmer's wife was suddenly turned to gold. Three ravens sat on the leafless walnut tree by the cottage gate. Elfie knew what they said, in Roman times at any rate:

"Cras! Cra-as!"

Tomorrow. Tomorrow.

The next night it was Klaus's turn to wheel the tall plastic garbage container right out to the road. When he came back, he said uncertainly, "Were you out there, Jutta?"

He had seen a woman walking through the fields toward the empty grave. Taller than Elfie. Jutta had not been out. Frau Beck? Surely not. A woman . . . this made him uncomfortable . . . in some kind of blue cloak. Elfie was curled up on the couch with her mythology book. Everyone was longing for her to stay clean, the way she was. A new person. Now she said, "It *was* a woman in the grave. There was an article in the paper."

"Du spinnst!" snapped Klaus. "You're crazy!"

He was instantly sorry and it showed in his face, but Elfie just winked at him and said, "Not any more!"

Next afternoon, in the pale autumn sunshine, Elfie picked a bunch of ragged asters, purple, crimson, and blue. As the two girls went down toward the Celtic grave, they ran into Beck, hectoring and jolly.

"Killed a pig!" he cried. "Slit its belly and held the basin! What's the use of a wife who can't stand the sight of blood? What's the use of a wife at all—eh?"

He swung his slash-hook and leveled a tall thistle. Jutta was suddenly revolted by the old man.

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"You should be ashamed of yourself!" she said loudly.

Beck uttered a belly-laugh. The temperature had dropped and a mist came up suddenly. The two girls could hardly see the cottage when they looked back. The last they saw of the farmer he was pointing his slash-hook at the sky and shooting down imaginary birds.

"Peng!" he shouted. "Peng!"

The museum people had made a tidy job of the excavation site, which would have to wait for further exploration until next summer. It was marked out, and covered with green canvas. Elfie knelt down and laid the flowers at the head of the grave. Jutta thought: *The grave is empty. We are propitiating her spirit.*

They were in a circle of mist now, still as the eye of a hurricane. Jutta began to walk up the rise past the stone marker toward the stunted pear tree. The ground under her feet was springy and damp. She found the tree, and it was a young oak, arching high over her head. She laid her hands upon the bark. The mist hung in wisps over the green moor; a tall woman in a blue cloak was walking away toward the farmhouse. Sunlight came through the dwindling mist and Jutta saw it catch the golden border of the woman's cloak. Jutta was shaken with awe and wonder. A bird cried out overhead and it was Elfie calling, calling her back.

"I'm here!" she called in reply. "Can't you see me?"

Then she was standing by the old pear tree. The green landscape of the peat-bog had vanished. She could see no sign of the woman in the blue cloak, but, as the mist swirled away from the Heidenhof, there was Frau Beck, motionless, in the yard.

Jutta rubbed her eyes and made her decision. She could not run down to poor Elfie, just out of drug dependence, and babble about her own trip. The tree, the green moor, the blue cloak—she would keep them for herself. She felt particularly calm and unafraid; all was right with the world as they walked back through the fields to the cottage. No one loomed up out of the last curls of mist to frighten them; Farmer Beck had gone.

Next morning, as she came back from the grocer's shop, Jutta met Frau Beck on the track. The farmer's wife was looking as presentable as Jutta had ever seen her, buttoned up in her best black coat, the one that she wore to church or to the cemetery in Breitbach, with a pink woolen hat, gloves, a leather overnight bag.

"Grüss Gott!" she said cheerfully.

"Grüss Gott, Frau Beck."

Afterward, Jutta had to take care not to read too much into this last meeting. Had the woman been altogether changed, straight-backed, head held high, eyes bright? The sequence of events was important as well. Two days later, Elfie ran away. Jutta was at the library, and the two men seemed to have mismanaged everything. Oh, Elfie had been so

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cunning, according to Michael, just like the first time. One moment she was in the kitchen making salad, while Klaus set out for the shop. She called "I'll go too!" and Michael thought nothing of it until Klaus came back alone.

When Jutta came back, she found the house deserted, salad half made; Michael had taken the car out. Then the car came roaring back: the two men had driven to the bus stop and the railway station and cruised the roads where Elfie might have tried for a lift into Frankfurt. It was getting dark; Klaus was in despair.

"Oh, you idiots!" cried Jutta. "Didn't you even think to look . . . "

She was rushing out now herself.

"Where?" cried Michael. "Where are you going?"

"To the grave!" she said. "Let *me* go."

She did not want them out in the fields, calling, at nightfall. There was light in the Heidenhof. She took a round-about way through the fields, as far as possible from the farmhouse. The sky was clear, but it was long before moonrise. Jutta looked up at the stars, and when she looked down again, there were small lights at the site of the grave, as if stars had fallen.

The land had changed; the peat-bog stretched out before her, green and luminous in the autumn night. There was Elfie, a faint dark figure, huddled among clumps of high reeds. Yet under her boot soles, Jutta knew that the ground really was firm; ages had passed. She had only to press on resolutely through the ghost of the marsh towards Elfie—and toward the woman in the blue cloak, who rose up now, tall as a tree.

"Please!" called Jutta. "Please—she must come back!"

The woman's face was not in shadow, but afterward Jutta could never remember it. A fall of hair, perhaps, a jeweled band across the forehead. Step by step, Jutta went forward, and the vision faded. Elfie stood up, and she was transfigured; the skin of her face shone. She lifted her hands high above her head in invocation. She spoke three times in a strange tongue at the head of the empty grave, and each time cast down a handful of earth and leaves. Jutta heard the small stones rattle on the green canvas. They stood with bent heads; after some time, a train went by. Jutta took Elfie by the hand and led her slowly back to the cottage. Before they reached the gate, she was herself again.

It was a long night. Klaus had been unable to sit still, he ran down to the Heidenhof to ask if they had seen Elfie. The kitchen light was on, but the farmhouse was deserted. Willi Beck lay dead in the barn in a pool of blood. Some kind of freak accident . . . or so the police decided later, after taking everything into account. He'd slipped and fallen backward, hitting his head, and the slash-hook had neatly opened a vein in his thigh. The comical old fellow had bled to death, like a stuck pig.

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There was no one he could have called, even if he had regained consciousness. His wife was apparently visiting her family . . . in Hanau was it?

That was right, agreed Jutta. She had seen Frau Beck leaving on the Tuesday, and she had seen Herr Beck working in the yard on Wednesday and Thursday, quite definitely. Wasn't that so, Michael? Michael pulled his lip thoughtfully; well, he couldn't swear to it, but he had seen Beck on the track, Wednesday. Probably Wednesday.

Jutta was amazed at their spontaneity. She had lied right off the top of her head to protect Frau Beck, and Michael had backed up her lie. Not that the police seemed to suspect anything other than an accident.

Udo Beck inherited the Heidenhof; his stepmother received her legal share of the estate. Udo sold off the old place because it was under protection as an historic monument and couldn't be torn down. A Green co-operative bought the farm, restored the buildings, and used the land for a tree nursery and an organic market garden.

The museum people spent another summer at the site of the grave, but found only a few Celtic ornaments. Elfie and Klaus came back to work with them on the dig. They also helped with the new visitor, Thorsten, in residence at the cottage. Elfie was completely cured; no one doubted that she would stay clean for the rest of her life.

In another minor miracle, the underground water-level tipped over again, and the dry, ridged area became moist and fertile. Jutta and Elfie could stand at the garden gate and look down at bulrushes and young willow trees.

"Dear heaven," said Jutta. "I hope She is satisfied!"

Secretly, she was afraid of backlash. Perhaps one day, far off, in another age, an angry ghost in peasant dress would appear in the fields, shouting at people, bawling out awful jokes. ●

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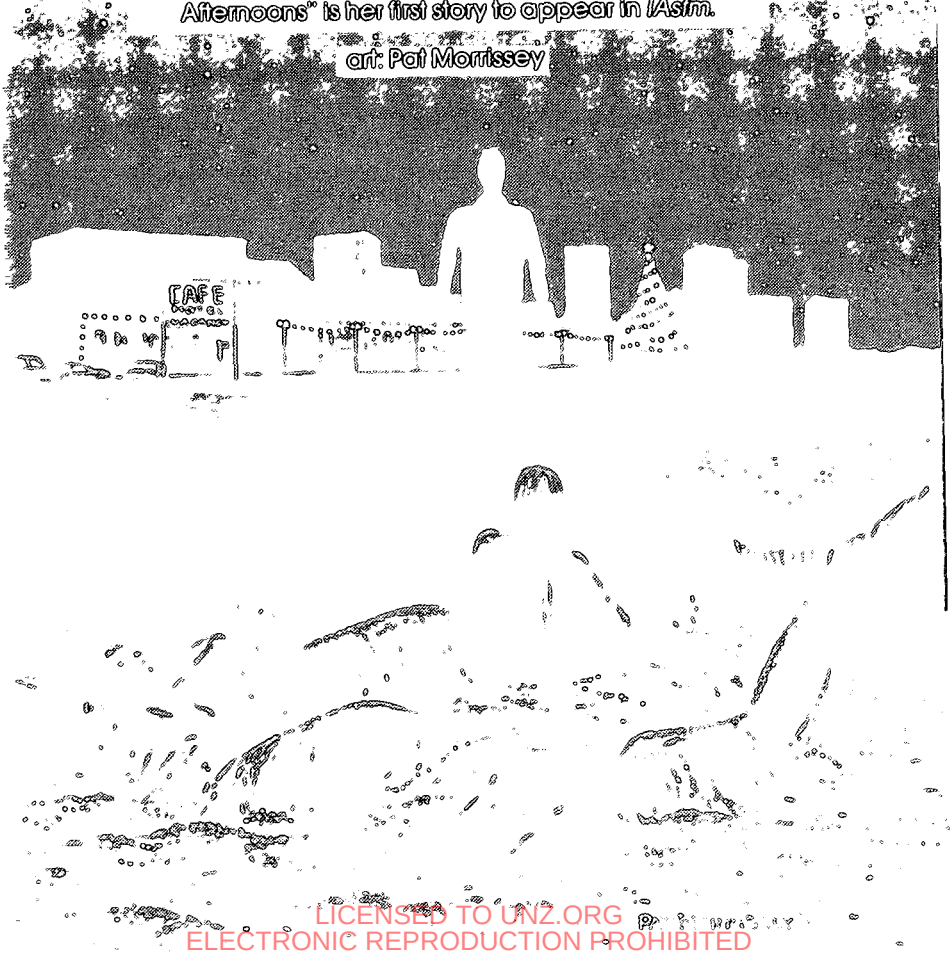
EVENINGS, MORNINGS, AFTERNOONS

by Bridget McKenna

Bridget McKenna lives in the "gold country" town of Nipinnawasee, California (pop. 75), and works as a copy and technical writer for a large software publisher. Ms. McKenna has sold stories to *The Writers of the Future*, *Amazing*, and *Pulphouse*. Her bittersweet seasonal tale of "Evenings, Mornings, Afternoons" is her first story to appear in *IAsfm*.

art: Pat Morrissey



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The sky was the gray of tarnished silver, the ocean a mere shade darker, and there was a place out where they came together, where a new element neither air nor water seemed to rise up from the swells and fall down from the heavens. Jonathan's clothes grew damp through his coat as the fog bank rolled in, obscuring the sight of the boardwalk and hotel, the other bundled-up old people strolling the winter beach, and finally the waves themselves.

He watched until he could no longer see, then stood in one place and listened for a bit. The gulls were grounded and there was only the boom and roar of the breakers. Whatever, whoever he had been seeing out there, was gone now. He was aware of pain. He turned and walked back to the hotel.

"Pot of tea, Jon?" the waitress asked as he came into the coffee shop and hung his coat and sweater on the rack. "Look at that, you haven't got a hat! How come you went out there on a day like this without a hat?"

"Dolores, my mother died in 1934, and from that day to this I don't wear a hat at anyone's bidding but my own." He sat down at his table. "You weren't even born in 1934," he added, looking up at her as she carried the pot to the table and turned his cup rightside up.

"You always know what to say to the ladies, Jon," she said, patting her ash-blonde wig and smiling like a young girl. Her eyelashes fluttered a bit—false ones. Dolores hadn't been here long enough for anyone to tell her why her advances weren't working. Jonathan returned the smile. "Could I have some water, too, please?"

"Sure thing. And, hey, our special today is meat loaf, just like Mom used to make. Should I bring you a plate?"

"My mother never made meatloaf, and in my memory none of our cooks ever stooped that low either. However, I might be willing to take a chance on the power of your recommendation. And maybe a paper if there's one around."

He put the teabag into the hot water and reached into his pocket for his pills. He set the little amber bottle on the white tablecloth and stared at it long after she had come and gone with the water and paper. The pills muddled his head; he hated them. The pain wasn't really that bad yet. He would wait.

Kostopoulos came in and sat down across from him, uninvited, but then it would never occur to Kostopoulos to ask anyone's leave about anything. "Great day out. Not a goddamn skate punk in sight." He hung his cane over the back of the chair and wriggled out of his dripping raincoat. "Dolores! I'll have the meatloaf!"

"I'm not deaf, Kostopoulos. Don't bark at me."

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"It's not you, dear, he barks at everyone," Jonathan said from behind his newspaper. "I suppose you heard about Rose," he said.

"Yeah. Mrs. Fabiano told me this morning. Too bad."

"Not really," said Jonathan, folding up the paper. "I'm glad it's over for her. I went to see her Tuesday, you know." He removed the teabag, squeezing it gently against the back of a spoon, and poured a cup of tea. "I don't think she recognized me, but I stayed a while and talked to her anyway. I don't think she even knew where she was." For that matter, he was certain she hadn't known *who* she was, but he didn't say this. Death had been too long coming for Rose.

"What's that?" Kostopoulos asked, jabbing a finger at the pill bottle.

"Just a prescription," Jonathan answered, glancing at the clock as he put the bottle back in his pocket.

When he reached his room it had been four and a half hours, and the pain had won. At least he had managed the stairs once more; another victory over the elevator, that moldy beast whose groans disturbed his peace every day and night as it ground its way between the floors of the hotel.

He took two capsules with a glass of water and sat down with a book, but what he had gained in anodyne had been lost from mental clarity; as the medication took effect, he found himself unable to concentrate on the words. Wearily, he dug out the other bottle, the sleeping capsules, and took two of those on his way to bed. He could count on two or three hours of heavy, dreamless sleep before he would wake again.

The fog had gone, leaving a cool clear night, and he opened his window a bit to hear the surf. He peered out at the black Pacific for a moment, but of course it would be too dark to see them. If there was an offshore breeze tomorrow he would look again. If it had been a hallucination, if he really were going crazy, he should be able to see them anytime.

He lay down on his back and felt the strong dark hands of artificial sleep pressing him into the mattress. His last waking thought was of the mermaids.

He was wrong about the dreams, though. He dreamed of Rose lying in her white gown in her white bed, criss-crossed by tubes; life going in, life going out. He dreamed of the whisper of oxygen and the gurgle of fluids and the steady beep of the monitors. He woke to music.

It was coming from the ocean—a harp played by wind or perhaps water, striking random notes that composed a melody of such rightness it might have been improvised by the infant Mozart. Voices joined in, in harmonies so close water could not have trickled between them. He had a moment to think how lovely it was before it occurred to him to be frightened.

The next day was unseasonably bright and sunny, even for California.

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The usual fog that lay on the beach until noon even in summer had left early, driven seaward by a stiff offshore breeze and a venturesome sun. Jonathan felt well enough to postpone his morning pain pill, and he set out for the library, where he had set a young assistant to doing some research for him the day before. She smiled as he walked toward her desk. " 'Morning, Jonathan. Isn't it a gorgeous day out?"

"Yes it is, Diedre. In fact it's entirely too gorgeous a day for you to be sitting here surrounded by oxidizing paper and pasteboard. How would you like to chuck all this and go down to the boardwalk?"

"Yeah, and tomorrow I could take up slinging burgers at Gus's place. Thanks anyway, though. Hey, I've been looking for those mermaids of yours."

For half a second he thought she knew what he'd been seeing in the waves, then realized she meant the library research.

"What have you found out?" His heart, slower to catch on, continued to pound for a minute.

"Well, I looked them up in several different references, and they all refer back to Homer. His sirens may have been the prototype, though similar things show up in a whole lot of different myths. Really nasty ladies, from all I can gather. Have you read the *Odyssey?"*

"Oh, yes. Several times, including once in Greek."

"Then I guess you know as much as anyone around here on the subject—more, if you count knowing how to read Greek." She shuffled through some notes. "There are later sea stories about them, too. The explanation appears to be sea cows—from a distance I guess they look kind of human."

"Yes, of course. Sea cows."

The fog stayed offshore, and the temperature continued to rise. Coats began to come off, and then sweaters, falling to the sand like the autumn leaves Jonathan had not seen for thirty years. Leaves in California, in his experience, either turned a sickly yellow or ignored the season altogether and stayed on the tree in defiance of all that might be considered natural in Massachusetts. No matter, he much preferred it here.

He was walking along the beach with Kostopoulos, who was out for the first of his twice-daily walks which also ignored the seasons. That old hardass would walk in a hurricane, if they ever had hurricanes in California, which of course they did not. They walked silently but companionably from the hotel to the beach, then half a mile south before they paused to rest on a tree trunk washed up past the high tide mark by a recent storm.

"Have you ever seen anything in the waves?" Jonathan asked him, when they had gained their breath.

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"Yeah. All the time."

"Really? What? What have you seen?"

"All kinds of shit. Beer bottles, plastic trash bags, those goddamn foam coffee cups. Once I found a whole box of condoms, still in the cellophane wrapper."

Jonathan chuckled in spite of himself. "What did you do with them?"

"I sold them to some surfers for five bucks. What the hell do I want with condoms at my age?"

"You're old, Kostopoulos, not dead."

"I'm old, and my dick's dead. What's the difference? You getting any these days?"

Jonathan shook his head. "There was a time, when I was young, I had all the lovers I could ever want. Even when I wasn't so young anymore, if you must know. There comes a time, though, when no one looks at you and sees someone they'd like to go to bed with. I'm years past that time, I'm afraid."

"Huh. Me, too. So anyway, why are you so interested in what washes up on the beach?"

"I'm not, really. It's just that lately, when I've sat and stared at the breakers a long time, I think I see something out there. Someone." He took off his shoes, put his socks inside them, started rolling up his pantlegs. "It's a beautiful day, Kostopoulos. What do you say we get our feet wet?"

Kostopoulos pulled his sweater closer about his shoulders and frowned. "I say you're a crazy old fairy, and I say you're going to catch your death of a cold."

Now there was a thought. Jonathan laughed. It hurt, but he laughed again anyway because it felt good. There was a thought; that he should die of a cold. He walked into the surf and let it rise up to his knees while the winter sun warmed his back. "Ever see any sea cows?" he called back over his shoulder.

"Naw, no cows. Just junk."

After a boring lunch at the hotel he went out again, reluctant to waste any of the extraordinary day. The sun had brought life back to the boardwalk. Skateboarders whizzed past him, knees bent, arms making graceful signs of balance in the air. One of them pulled up beside him and popped his board up on its stern. "Yo, Jonathan."

"Yo, Wheeler. What's happening? Haven't seen you around in a while."

"Been down south."

"Ah, the annual tattoo. Let's see."

Wheeler turned around and pulled his shirt up above his right shoulder blade, where a skull grinned beneath a crown of spikes radiating outward

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like a metal benediction. He looked back at him over his shoulder. "You like?"

"I like. Nice work."

The skater shrugged his shirt back into place. "Buy you a snow?"

"Who'd be selling snows out here in November?"

"I saw Hairy Mary setting up down the boardwalk first thing this morning."

"In that case, yes." One of Mary's brilliant ices might almost make it summer on a day like this. "Say, Wheeler, what do you know about mermaids?"

Wheeler thought for a moment before answering. "Sailor's fantasies on those long sea voyages. Cute chicks in Peter Pan. Beautiful women who lure men to their death on the rocks. Of course the ones in Peter Pan didn't seem quite that sinister."

"How about sea cows?"

"Sea cows? You mean like manatees? Like that?"

"Yes, I suppose that's what I mean."

"Not around here. They're more of an Atlantic kind of thing, I think."

"Yes. That's what I thought, too."

Hairy Mary shaved two Hawaiian Snows for them and poured on syrups from tall bottles of summer colors. "Hey Mary," Wheeler said, sliding his money across the stainless steel counter, "Have one with us. I just got paid."

"Never touch the stuff," she replied, brushing stray flakes of ice from her formidable mustache and returning his change. "Full of artificial colors and shit."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I eat 'em." He buried his face in his rainbow ball of ice and emerged with brilliant pink lips and tongue. "Hey, maybe Mary knows something about mermaids, Jonathan. She spends six months every year looking at the ocean. I think Jonathan's writing a book or something. Tell him everything you know about mermaids."

"No, no. Nothing that grand, I'm afraid. Just curious. This is a beach town after all, and mermaids live in the ocean—that is, if there were any such thing they would live there—I'm just curious to know if you've ever heard anyone say they'd seen any, that's all."

"I'll tell you what, Jonathan. If anybody ever did tell me they'd seen one, I'd call the men in the white coats." She tapped her forehead. "Know what I mean?"

"Yes. Of course." Jonathan forced a laugh he didn't feel. "White coats. Indeed." He turned to follow Wheeler, who was headed for the nearest bench, snow in one hand, board in the other.

"So tell me about the new job at the funeral home," Jonathan said. "How are the dead people these days?"

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"Very quiet. Very little trouble. I get a lot of studying done, but they're not very good about helping with my assignments. You win some and you lose some." They sat down, facing the sun.

Jonathan tasted his snow. It was better than he remembered. He watched a wave break, shook his head. "Wheeler, you've known me for quite a few years now. If I told you I had seen mermaids, would you think I was crazy?"

Wheeler laughed. "Jonathan, look at me. I'm earning a Bachelor's in English Lit, I work in a mortuary, my hair is three different colors, I dress like *this,* and for kicks I spend my spare time dodging cars on a glorified roller skate. Do you think *I'm* crazy?"

Jonathan nodded slowly. "Thank you."

They sat in the sun eating the snows, and when they were done Wheeler said goodbye and went speeding off down the boardwalk. Jonathan sat and watched the swells out beyond the breakers. After a time he walked down to the beach.

He hunkered down on the sand with his arms about his knees, knowing his joints would have their vengeance later, but enjoying for now the restfulness, the calm, unconscious balance of the position. He watched the waves come in and go out in their endless fashion, uncaring for the brief lives of men, or of one man. He had been watching for perhaps a quarter of an hour when they came back.

At first it was just a cloudiness in his vision, a whispering in his ears under the boom of the surf. His heart quickened as the cloudiness began to resolve itself into faces, the whisper into the convoluted water-harp harmonies he had heard the night before. As calmly as he could manage, he removed his glasses and polished them with the corner of his jacket, almost dropping them in the sand, his hands trembled so.

He could see better when he put them back on, and the faces were still there, clearly smiling now, though they did not seem to take notice of him, but laughed and sang to one another in their impossible voices. The waves were full of laughing young men and women, their long hair spread out upon the waters. He trembled for his sanity, but could not take his eyes away. They toyed with the great ropes of seaweed, wrapping them about one another like cloaks and gowns, and admiring the effect as they pushed back from each wave just before it broke, keeping their distance from the shore.

As it had been the other times he saw them, his first thought was that they must be human; bodysurfers against all likelihood frolicking in the frigid autumn ocean, but time and again a great green tail would break the surface of the water and smack down with a loud slapping sound, and one of them would laugh a laugh like bells under water.

It could not be real, of course. The answer was obvious to him; the

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black thing that was eating him alive had got to his brain, and he would die like Rose, unaware, no longer human. Tears came into his eyes and when he had wiped them away the waves were empty again. The unseasonal sun had gone to hide behind the fog, as was proper for the time of year, and the chill of November had come back from its brief vacation.

He straightened up slowly, aware of the sensation in his knees more than of that in his guts, but the pain in his soul was sharpest. He brushed the sand from his trousers and took his time getting up to the street. There would be some bland dinner or other at the hotel, and Dolores attempting seduction, and Kostopoulos bitching about tourists and skate punks, and he didn't think he could stand it without screaming.

He skirted the dining room and went to his room by the stairs. He could hear the ancient elevator grumbling and wheezing its way down the shaft as someone called it from its slumber on the third floor. It was getting harder to walk up, but he could still get himself to his room on his own two feet and not have to hitch a ride on that screeching contraption. From the way it sounded today, maybe he would outlive it after all.

Thanksgiving dinner was all the roast turkey you could eat, a safe bet for a bunch of old farts; none of them ate much anymore, and Jonathan's appetite was going. By December, Dolores was fussing over him, teary-eyed, and bringing him jars of chicken soup from the kitchen. Even Kostopoulos had begun to notice something.

"You should see a doctor," he told him on one of their walks, when for the first time Jonathan was having trouble keeping up. "You don't look so good."

"Looked in a mirror later, Kostopoulos?"

"I always been ugly. You look sick."

He looked worse by mid-December. He was taking the pills all the time now, and once he found a note in his own handwriting saying "No more pain pills!" He couldn't remember writing it. The damned pills were slowly robbing him of his edge. The keenness of mind he had always taken pride in was all but gone. The nightmares and the mermaids had both remained, though. By day he watched the waves and by night he dreamed and woke in fear, and always death dogged him, wearing Rose's face. He had taken to riding the elevator up to his floor.

The jury was still out on the insanity case; some days he didn't see the sea-people and was sure they were the illusion of another crazy old man who would soon be talking to the air down on the boardwalk. Some days he *did* see them, and at those times he came to feel that he could have touched their slick young bodies if he had been out there in the water

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with them. Once, very recently, he thought he had caught one of them looking at him.

He didn't see Wheeler as often these days, but that was because he didn't get to the beach every day, the way he used to. It was colder down by the water, and it seemed he was always cold anyway. He stayed in his room a lot and dozed in a chair by the window and listened for the song of the sirens. Sometimes it came.

It came on Christmas Eve, after a long December storm that blew salt water against his windows and threw great mounds of seaweed onto the beach. There was a sudden silence as the massive trailing edge of the storm front passed on its way east, and into it trickled the aqueous song that had become such a part of his life these last months. Jonathan woke from his doze and turned to look out the window, but the salt scum obscured his view. The music grew louder.

He rose stiffly and began to dress. The sun had burst out of confinement and filled his room with yellow radiance. In a little while the beachcombers would be walking the strand, heads down, not to miss whatever treasures the storm had bestowed. He wanted to be down there ahead of them.

Kostopoulos opened his door as Jonathan walked by. "About time you're getting some exercise, you old slug. I'd go with you, but I think I broke my toe here, kicking some little bastard's board out from under him the other day."

Jonathan smiled. "That's okay, Kostopoulos. Rest. Elevate the foot. Have some whiskey."

"Think I will. I'll have one for you, too. Don't wear yourself out. You got your pills?"

Jonathan patted his pocket. The pills rattled obligingly. He put a hand on the other man's shoulder, bony as hell under the flannel robe. "You know what, Kostopoulos? I like you."

"You're full of shit—I don't even like myself. Button your goddamn coat." He reached out and did the buttons himself, shaking his head. "Go. Walk. Get some air."

The sky was brilliant after two days of near-darkness. Jonathan squinted as he walked out toward the beach. The skateboarders had sensed the return of the sun, and he felt the vibration of their wheels under his feet when he stepped onto the boardwalk. Wheeler broke away from a group of speeding forms and brought his board's heel to ground inches from Jonathan's foot. "Long time, Jonathan."

"Yes, it has been. Too cold for me down here, lately. But I got restless, you know?"

"Who better? Everyplace I've ever been makes me restless after a while, except maybe right here. You going down to the beach?"

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"Yes, I am, as a matter of fact." He hoped Wheeler wouldn't want to come this time, but didn't want to seem inhospitable.

"Well, enjoy. Watch out for those mermaids, though. My Grandpa used to see them too. Crazy world, huh? Who knows, maybe they're really out there."

"And what if they are, Wheeler. What if they are?"

"Then I hope someday I get to see them, too. Take care of yourself, Jonathan. Oh, and Merry Christmas." He stepped onto the board and kicked off against the sodden planks of the boardwalk.

Jonathan stood and watched Wheeler weave in between pedestrians—a slalom of strolling old people in the afternoon sun. "Merry Christmas," he called after him, uncertain if he had been heard. Then he walked down the long flight of stairs to the still deserted beach.

He shielded his eyes against the glare of the water as he stared out beyond the waves. A glossy head broke water, then another; they were back, and this time they smiled and waved, and he knew for the first time that they could really see him.

They played their games for him—*to* him—an audience of one standing attentive a few feet from the shoreline, as they danced in and out, back and forth, all shining hair and smiling mouths and white arms beckoning in the green waves. One young merman with long copper-gold hair ventured closer and sang to him. Another joined in, and another, until all of them were making the air vibrate with their song. As Jonathan listened, he began to realize what it was they wanted.

He felt in his coat for the familiar cylinder of the pill bottle. His fingers fumbled with the cap and the pills spilled out onto the sand. He kicked them into the water, which was beginning to pool around his feet. The next wave covered them over and lapped over the tops of his shoes before retreating back the way it had come. The sea man held out his arms. Jonathan took a step into the surf, then another. A new theme wove itself into the song—a trio of notes that might have been his name.

Jonathan looked up, back toward the boardwalk and the hotel. There were figures in the distance, the first beachcombers come to reap the harvest. They had not seen him.

He kept walking forward. The water was warm. ●

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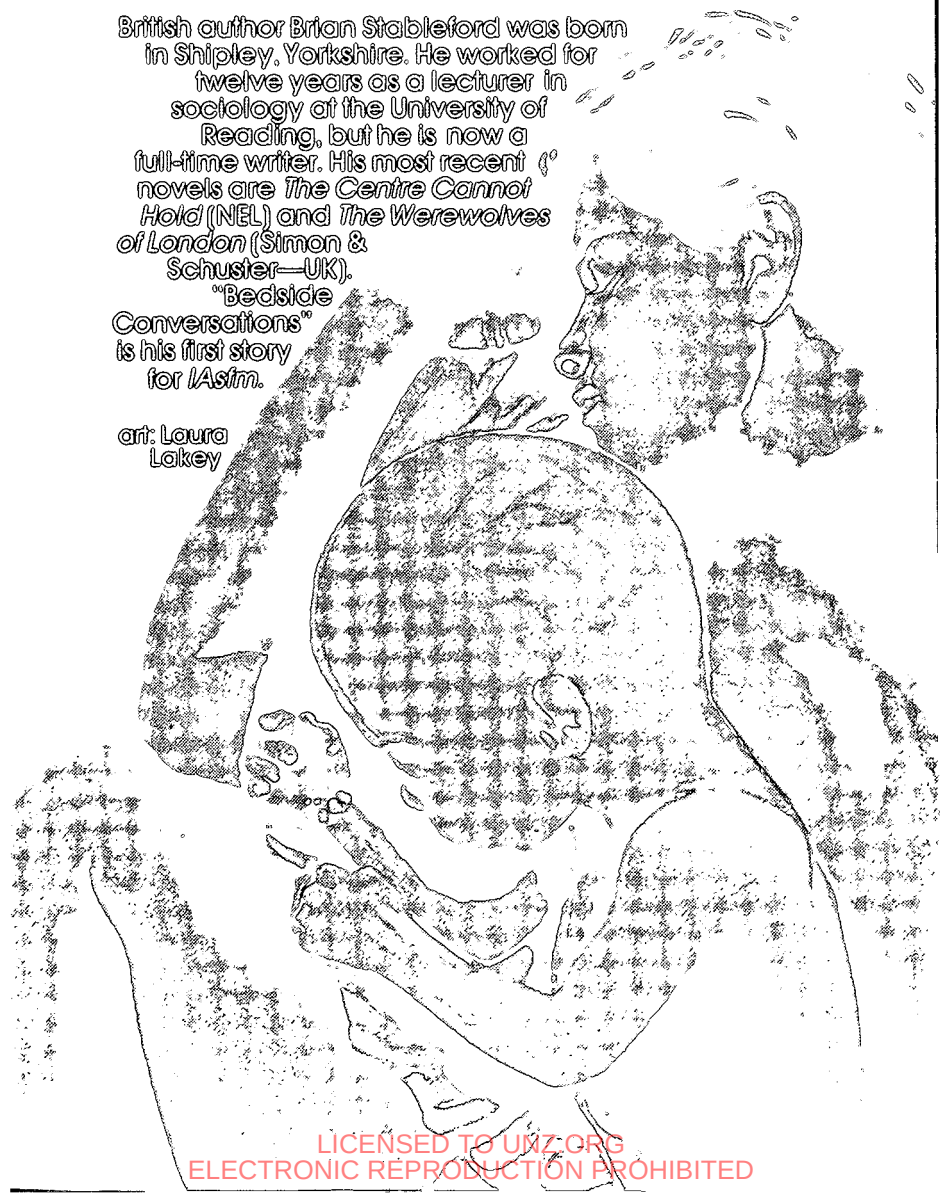
BEDSIDE CONVERSATIONS

by Brian Stableford

British author Brian Stableford was born in Shipley, Yorkshire. He worked for twelve years as a lecturer in sociology at the University of Reading, but he is now a full-time writer. His most recent novels are *The Centre Cannot Hold* (NEL) and *The Werewolves of London* (Simon & Schuster—UK). "Bedside Conversations" is his first story for *IAsim*.

art: Laura Lakey



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"It's not entirely unprecedented," said the doctor, "but so far as I know, this is the first time it's happened in the present medical context—which means, of course, that it poses a novel moral problem. I'll have to refer it to the hospital's Ethics Committee, of course, and they'll want to interview you, but I'm certain that the essential decision will be left in your hands."

Gerald heard what was being said to him, but couldn't find a sensible way to react to it. It was as though his thought-processes had seized up, leaving all the ideas in his head stuck fast, grinding against one another painfully as he tried to force them into motion again.

Dr. McClelland waited politely for an answer, but when none came he repeated the last phrase, for the sake of emphasis. "In your hands," he said, as though he were bestowing a favor.

Gerald found his voice again. "What did you say it was called?" he asked.

"*Fetus in fetu*. What happens, you see, is that the fertilized ovum divides, as it does when producing identical twins—but then one embryo develops faster than the other, growing around it. Usually, development of the engulfed embryo is simply suspended and never restarts; even in those cases where it does restart, it rarely produces a perfect fetus."

"This has happened before, then?"

"Oh yes. The first reported case was in the late nineteenth century, when the French surgeon Dupuytren found an apparently-entire fetus in the body of a thirteen-year-old boy. In England at a slightly later date, Blundell tracked the development of a similar fetus in a nine-year-old which was contained in a sac and connected to the abdominal wall by an umbilical cord. At thirty-one you may be the oldest person on record to have the problem, but you're certainly not the first."

"What happened to the two boys?"

"Those particular ones both died. But you needn't worry about that, Mr. Duncan; this is the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth. You're in no danger at all. The twentieth century cases fared better. A surgeon named McIntyre operated to remove a similar fetus from an eleven-year-old boy in the 1920s; the boy made a full recovery. I found records of three later operations, all successful—but the last one was in 1992, before the first successful experiments in tissue-reconstruction."

Gerald found a lump in his throat which he couldn't quite contrive to swallow. He was possessed by a perverse mix of emotions. On the one hand, he was deeply relieved that the tumor had turned out not to be malign; on the other hand, he was horrified by the revelation that it wasn't really a cancer tumor at all, but the phantom embryo of a twin brother he'd never had. He pressed his right hand to the bulge which was distending his abdomen to the side of his navel. Four months had

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passed since he first noticed the swelling—two since he had belatedly become anxious enough to seek medical advice.

"How soon will you need to operate?" he asked numbly.

"It's not as simple as that," replied McClelland patiently. "That's what I've been trying to explain. It has to go to the Ethics Committee—but I really am certain that the final decision will be left to you."

"What decision?"

"What will happen to the embryo, of course. That's why there's a new precedent to be established, you see. In none of the cases I've cited could there be any question of the embryo surviving and coming to term, so the only possible course of action in each case was to remove it. Nowadays, though, we have other options. If we act promptly, it's possible that we could transplant the embryo into a host mother. On the other hand, we could use tissue-reconstruction to stimulate your own cells so that they'd develop a viable placenta. In fact, the Ethics Committee might take the view that the one thing we *can't* do is to treat the fetus as if it were a tumor—they could well conclude that an operation to remove it would count as an abortion, in which case it would be illegal by reason of the twenty-week time-limit.

"As far as I can tell, the fetus is at the same developmental stage one would expect of a twenty-four or twenty-five week embryo. It's smaller, of course, but I have no evidence to suggest that it's damaged. In my experience, Ethics Committees always look for the closest thing to a precedent they can find—and they're likely to take the view that you should be viewed as if you were a pregnant mother who, for some reason, can't actually give birth."

"I'm pregnant," said Gerald, feeling that the notion was more than slightly surreal, "and I can't get an abortion."

"That's not unprecedented either," said the doctor. "In fact . . . "

"Never mind the precedents," Gerald interrupted him. "Let's stick to me. Are you telling me that I might be *forced* to carry this fetus until it's capable of independent life—that you won't cut it out until you're sure that it can survive in an incubator?"

"No, I'm *not* saying that," replied McClelland testily. "The fetus is still viable now, but that doesn't guarantee that you can carry it to term—not, at any rate, without considerable tissue-restructuring to make sure that you can sustain it while it grows. It might be better—indeed, it might be a matter of some urgency—to transplant it into a woman's womb, or into one of the new artificial wombs under test at St. Mary's. That's a decision which you'll have to make, but it must be an *informed* decision, morally as well as medically—which is where the Ethics Committee comes in.

"I've already sent in my preliminary report, but the committee will

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want a more detailed one as soon as I've collated all the data. We can't discharge you—and we must respectfully demand that you don't discharge yourself—until the committee has met and made its views known to you. But you really mustn't worry; what we *all* want is to figure out where your best interests lie, and where the best interests of your brother lie."

The vital phrase—"the best interests of your brother"—lingered in Gerald's mind long after the doctor had gone.

"I'm pregnant," said Gerald, flatly.

"If that's a joke, dear heart," said Mark Cleminson, "it's in very bad taste, and it isn't even funny."

"It's not a joke," Gerald assured him. "It's a *fetus in fetu*."

While he explained, with painstaking patience, he studied Mark's face very carefully.

Mark and Gerald had been together for five years, and married for two. They had married, in fact, a mere three days after the law had at last been amended to permit same-sex marriages. They had—not unnaturally—been carried away by the triumphant feeling that a great victory had been won for justice and equality, and that its potential must be exploited to the full. Alas, Gerald sometimes felt that their relationship had failed to live up to the expectations into which that moral and political victory had seduced them. Like most marriages made on earth, theirs had fared no better than those supposedly made in Heaven, and he was no longer sure whether or not Mark still loved him—or, for that matter, whether Mark had ever *really* loved him. He couldn't help wondering whether this might be the acid test which would reveal the truth of the matter.

"It's a trifle macabre," said Mark, when the explanation was complete, "to think of you swallowing up your little brother-to-be like that. One expects a certain amount of sibling rivalry, of course, but prenatal cannibalism is taking things a *little* too far, don't you think?"

Gerald pursed his lips, but dutifully suppressed his impatient ire. "It's not a joke, Mark," he repeated patiently.

"Oh, cheer up," Mark retorted. "Yesterday we thought you might have some dreadful cancer devouring you from the bowel outward. I'm sorry if I sound flippant, but it's mostly relief, I assure you. You did say that it isn't dangerous, didn't you?"

"It isn't dangerous," admitted Gerald, "but it isn't straightforward either." He explained about the Ethics Committee, carefully gauging Mark's reaction to every point in the chain of argument. He knew that he was going to have to go through this whole thing again, at least twice more. His parents would have to know, and so would his employers. He

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hoped that it might not be necessary to tell anyone else, but he could hardly avoid the dreadful fear that the media might get hold of the story. It would be news anyhow, but the fact that he was married to another man would give the headline-writers a field day.

He already knew how his parents would react to the story, because they always reacted the same way to everything he did—with pain, shock, and horror. They subscribed very heavily to the where-did-we-go-wrong school of rhetoric, and they would try to make him feel as guilty about this as they had about every other respect in which he offended them. In fact, he had a nasty suspicion that his mother, at least, would instantly begin to contend that her life would have been much less troubled if only Gerald had been the embryo which was engulfed.

It was harder to guess how they would react at the office; everyone there had been supremely sympathetic and supportive while it seemed that he might have cancer, but this was something else.

All in all, Gerald felt that he had just undergone an instantaneous role-switch from brave invalid to freak, and he badly needed some reassurance from his first and closest confidant to the effect that other people could ride with the punch.

"That's *repulsive*," said Mark, when he'd finished. "Do they seriously imagine that you'd consent to tissue-reconstruction just so that you can carry the fetus until they'll condescend to whip it out? Hell, it's like one of those old twentieth century jokes about homosexual couples, which should have been laid to rest with the Dark Ages. Holy shit, they *will* keep it quiet, won't they?"

"I suppose they'll try," Gerald replied unhappily. "At least, they will if they remove the fetus. If they don't . . . well, news is bound to get around if I have to put in an application for maternity leave."

"*Now* who needs reminding that it's not a joke? Thank God it's your decision—it *will be* your decision, won't it?"

"So the doctor says—but it has to be an informed decision, medically and morally. He was very clear about that. Whatever's best for baby. . . "

"Whatever's best for *both* of you. The greatest good of the greatest number, remember. Don't let the bastards talk you into anything. I wouldn't trust a doctor as far as I could throw a feather into a headwind."

Neither would I, thought Gerald. *That's why I delayed going to see one, and thus made certain that this would become a matter of some urgency.* Aloud, he said: "I won't. But Dr. McClelland's right—it does have to be an informed decision, and it has to be taken very carefully."

Mark stared at him, his grey eyes as hard as flints. Gerald couldn't figure out, now, just why he'd once thought that those eyes were extraordinarily sexy and sensitive.

"Gerry," said Mark, in a voice which was suddenly rather cold, "you

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couldn't possibly think that you might carry this kid around for the next God-knows-how-long. You couldn't possibly."

"It would only be for three months at the most, Mark," Gerald pointed out. "After all, a man's got to do what a man's got to do . . . " He couldn't suppress a giggle, despite the fact that he was trying to be serious. The flippancy, in fact, was only a way of concealing just how serious he was.

An informed decision, medically and morally—that was what it was all about. The doctor was right.

"That's not funny, Gerry," said Mark, who was of course correct for all the wrong reasons. "That's not funny at all."

"Your father and I talked about it all night," said Leonie Duncan positively, "and we've agreed that there's only one thing to be done."

"Oh, yes?" said Gerald, hollowly. "And what's that, Mother?"

"The baby has to be transplanted, as soon as possible."

"Well," said Gerald, dubiously, "that may turn out to be the best decision—but I'm not sure as yet. Dr. McClelland's given me the results of the latest tests, and I had a long conversation with the secretary of the Ethics Committee this morning. He's convening a meeting this evening, so that we can go over the alternatives very carefully. Until then, it just won't be possible to make a final decision, no matter what you and Dad may think."

"Committees can't make decisions, Gerry," said Leonie, with the casual air of one stating the obvious. "The committee that set out to design the horse came up with the camel. It's as plain as day what should be done, and we don't need any committee confusing the issue."

"But it's *not* as plain as day, mother," said Gerald wearily. "It's really rather complicated, medically speaking."

"Well I'm not speaking *medically*," she said. "I'm speaking about right and wrong, and there's only one rightful place for that baby."

She was looking at him so assertively, and yet with such awkward embarrassment, that he was quite confused. Several seconds passed before he suddenly realized what she meant.

"Oh my God!" he said. "You can't be serious!"

"He's *my* child," she said, assertiveness tipping over into naked aggression. "He's not your child—he's *mine*. He doesn't belong in an artificial womb, and he certainly doesn't belong inside *you*. He's *my* son, and nobody has any right to put him anywhere else but in my womb. I'm willing to do it, Gerry, and I'm willing to go to court to establish my rights."

"Mother," said Gerald, feeling once again that strange sense of the surreality of his condition, "you're fifty-seven years old. What makes you think your womb's in any fit condition to carry a fetus?"

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"Don't be ridiculous, darling," Leonie replied. "I may be menopausal, but I'm in perfect working order—and if I'm not, I'm certain that it would be far easier to reconstruct my tissues than it would be to reconstruct *yours*. After all, I *do* have the right equipment, even if it hasn't been used for a while. And afterward, the child would be with its natural parents."

"Dad's sixty-three. Are you telling me he *wants* to be a parent again?"

"He already *is* a parent," said Leonie decisively. "It's not a matter of want—it's a matter of fact."

"If the fetus *is* to be transplanted," Gerald said, trying to sound gentle, "and *if* we decide against an artificial womb, I think it would be best to look for a younger and healthier surrogate mother."

"Well I don't," she retorted. "And if that's what your Ethics Committee decides—or if that's what *you* decide—I'll fight it. This is *my* baby, and no one else has a better right to carry him and give birth to him—and there isn't a court in the land which would award custody of him to anyone else."

"Mother," said Gerald, patiently and soothingly, "I don't think you ought to be thinking like this. Mark and I would far rather keep the whole thing quiet—we certainly don't want any tabloid publicity. If you go near a court, you'll have every newsvid team in the country baying at our heels. Whatever I decide to do will be in the best interests of everyone, I promise you—but you must see how difficult it is. Imagine it was one of your friends—what would you say if you found out that Margery Lingard was proposing to have a fetus transplanted into her womb? You'd be horrified, wouldn't you?"

"He's *my* baby," said Leonie Duncan doggedly. "He's not yours, he's *mine*. My son. My *natural* son."

Gerald winced at the double meaning, and saw his mother smile thinly. She knew perfectly well what she'd said; he knew perfectly well what she meant.

He knew, also, what Mark would have said had he been there. "Let the bitch have it, and welcome," he'd have said. Mark didn't usually want Leonie Duncan to have her own way about anything, but this would be too good to miss—in Mark's view, it would be killing two birds with one stone. And he'd be right: one stone, two dead birds. Maybe *really* dead.

"I'm going to see your blessed Ethics Committee," said Leonie defiantly. "I'm going to see them right now, and I'm going to make sure they know what *I* think. An informed decision is what you want—and an informed decision is what you're going to get. They'll give me this baby—*or else*."

Gerald watched her go, feeling infinitely wearier than he had when

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she first came in. She always had that effect on him, and he guessed that she always would. Nothing could change that; nothing at all.

"How did the meeting go?" asked Mary Blake, anxious curiosity very evident within her gentle politeness. Mary was Gerald's Head of Department, and his only friend of the opposite sex. Gerald was hoping fervently that she'd be just disinterested enough to provide him with a little honest sympathy.

"Efficiently ponderous would be the best description, I think," he said. Then, as if quoting from a book of regulations, he intoned: "The Ethics Committee of this hospital consists of five people: a senior consultant, a hospital administrator, a social worker, a lawyer, and a lay adviser. The administrator acts as secretary, the lawyer as chairman.

"Also present at the meeting to decide the fate of Fetus Duncan were Drs. McClelland and Digby, expert witnesses. Mr. Duncan was duly informed that he had the right to be represented by an advocate, which opportunity he duly refused, it having been made clear to him that the meeting was not supposed to be an adversarial situation, and that everyone's hope was to reach a unanimous decision as to what could and ought to be done."

"Sounds dire," said Mary.

"Not really," said Gerald. "They had to take pains, you see, to make sure that everything was understood, and everything was taken into account. They weren't just being pompous."

"And what did they decide, in the end?"

"An Ethics Committee," he intoned again, "is not a decision-making body. It acts in an advisory capacity only—but its duty is to advise the hospital as well as the patient, and if it considers the patient's decision to be ill-founded, it has a duty to advise the hospital of any such judgment."

"I mean," she amended, "what did *you* decide?"

"I haven't, yet," he admitted. "I have to make up my mind by six o'clock, so that the Committee can meet again and decide whether to endorse my decision or do the other thing. Time is standing still while I ponder the issues involved, weighing the pros and cons as carefully as I can."

"Of course," said Mary, "it's none of my business, really."

"Yes, it is," he told her dolorously. "It's your business, and Mark's, and my mother's and my father's, and McClelland's. Whatever I decide to do, it will affect *other* people—that's one of the things I have to bear in mind. There's the surgeon who might have to transplant the fetus, the surrogate mother who might have to carry it, the doctor in charge of the artificial womb which might otherwise have to carry it, et cetera, et cetera. God,

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wasn't life simple when it was only a tumor which might have metastasized, leaving me with six months of life?"

"Nobody gets six months to live any more," she said. "This is 2003. Everything's curable these days."

"Even a *fetus in fetu*," he agreed. "The wonders of tissue-reconstruction. Did you know that more than a hundred men have carried fetuses to term, worldwide? That's in spite of the bans in the EC and America. One hundred and seven successful Caesarian births—mind you, there have been some messy miscarriages, too."

"Wouldn't the transplant option be easier?" she asked. "Safer for everyone."

"Safer for the corporation's image," he agreed. "Unobtrusiveness is the life-blood of our promotion prospects, isn't it?"

"That's not what I meant," she said in an aggrieved tone.

"No," he admitted. "I know it's not. And maybe it would be easier in strictly medical terms. Except that I can't help feeling that I might be pitching the poor little proto-person into a bear pit, where various contending parties might contrive to rip it apart while trying to save it."

"You mean that the artificial womb people may start fighting with the supporters of surrogate mothers? I suppose we're overdue for some kind of test case in that particular debate."

"Actually," he said mournfully, "I was thinking about *my* mother. But you're right, of course. The artificial womb people might well be looking for a soft target, and a *fetus in fetu* is certainly softer than a little bundle of cells in its own mummy's tummy."

"Is Leonie likely to make trouble?"

"Trouble," he said, "is far too mild a word for it. Hell hath no fury like a woman who has finally discovered the perfect way to pay back her only begotten son for being gay."

"Shit," said Mary sympathetically.

"Couldn't have put it better myself," he said.

"So what *are* you going to do?"

Gerald looked at his wristwatch. Normally he found the old-fashioned display reassuring, but today the second-hand seemed to be going round in an unnaturally hasty manner. He couldn't help feeling that a digital might have had a little more decorum.

"I'll know," he said, "in just over two hours' time. Anything sooner would be bound to seem hasty, wouldn't it?"

"I wish you the best of luck," she said.

"Luck," he assured her, with a sigh, "has absolutely nothing to do with it. It's purely a matter of moral and medical reasoning. I have all the necessary information—all that remains is to convert it by the power of pure reasoning into the right decision."

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"I *still* wish you the best of luck," she said. "And however the dice come down—I'll do whatever I can."

"Thanks," he said—and meant it.

Inevitably, it transpired that when six o'clock came, Mary Blake was the only one who had the decency not to be there and waiting. Leonie Duncan and Mark Cleminson turned up on the dot, and so did Dr. McClelland—but Gerald had no intention of making a speech.

"I'll see you one at a time," he insisted. "First the doctor, then you, mother, and Mark last. Please don't argue about the order of precedence—there isn't time for that sort of nonsense."

He watched Mark and his mother exchanging resentful glances, neither one of them quite sure whether or not they had been awarded the most favored position in the queue. In the end, though, they had to accept it. It was his decision, after all.

When they had both gone, and the door was closed, Gerald told Dr. McClelland what he had decided.

"You don't think," said McClelland dubiously, "that it's going a bit *far?* It's at least one step beyond what's strictly necessary."

"You *can* do it," said Gerald, "can't you? It's by no means unprecedented."

"In itself, no," admitted the doctor. "But for this reason . . . you haven't, I suppose, had any leanings in this direction before?"

"None at all," Gerald confessed, feeling that the seriousness of the occasion precluded a diplomatic lie. "But circumstances alter cases, don't they?"

The doctor nodded. "I'll have to refer it to the Committee," he said, "but I think they'll go along with it. As I've always said, I think they'd go along with anything you decided to do, except perhaps . . . " He nodded in the direction of the closed door.

"There was never a chance of *that*," said Gerald.

"Do you think she will go to court, now that you've decided?"

"I hope not. I hope Dad will talk her out of it. But if she does, so be it. After all, I can hardly hope to avoid publicity now that I've made my decision, can I?"

"No," said the doctor pensively, "I dare say you can't."

"You can't," said Leonie Duncan angrily. "It's preposterous. You *can't do it.*"

"Yes I can," said Gerald patiently. "It's perfectly feasible, and it avoids the worst aspects of both the other solutions. Tissue reconstruction is done all the time—it's just a matter of switching the right genes on and off."

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"It's obscene," she said. "It's unnatural."

"Mother," he said quietly, "everything that enables us to be human and civilized is unnatural. Wearing clothes is unnatural; speaking languages is unnatural; building houses and roads is unnatural; medicine is unnatural; in fact, every goddam thing which makes life worth living is unnatural. The only *natural* thing in this whole affair is that ridiculous freak of a baby brother, which is slowly turning into a king-sized pain in my gut. Nature is all stupid accidents, mother—human life is about taking reasoned decisions to oppose and overcome the waywardness of nature. That's what I've done. I won't say that it will be easy, but I will defend the reasonableness of my decision in any and every court in the land, if I have to. So you'll just have to go away, and decide what you're going to do, and then do it, won't you?"

Leonie Duncan burst into tears. "Whatever did we do *wrong?*" she wailed.

"You *can't,*" said Mark Cleminson, in utter disbelief. "It's preposterous. You can't do it."

"Yes, I can," said Gerald, patiently, conscientiously repeating himself. "It's perfectly feasible, and it avoids the worst aspects of both the other solutions. Tissue reconstruction is . . . "

Mark didn't wait to hear the rest of it. "But what about *us!*" he complained. "Don't *I* figure in this at all?"

"Of course you do," said Gerald. "We're married, aren't we? That doesn't have to change, unless you want it to."

"*Doesn't have to change!* You're mad, do you know that? Mad!"

Gerald studied those hard grey eyes. They looked like the eyes of a blind man, staring but not seeing.

"I suppose you'll tell me now that this is what you've always wanted," said Mark, converting his sense of injury into a sneer. "I suppose you've decided that you were never genuinely gay—that you were really a heterosexual woman in the wrong body. Well, *I'm* gay, and there is no way I'm going to put up with this nonsense. I'm telling you straight: get this *thing* transplanted—I don't give a damn whether it ends up in your mother, or a machine, or anyplace else—or we're through. Finished. *Kaput.*"

"Suit yourself," said Gerald, with a lack of remorse which surprised him more than a little. "It's only tissue-replacement, you know, not an identity transplant. It needn't even be permanent—I could change back after I stop breast-feeding. I'd still be *me.*"

"Like hell you would," said Mark, as though he were spitting out powdered glass. "Like hell."

* * *

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Afterward, when Gerald was alone (at last!), the doubts began to creep in. He laid his hand yet again on the *fetus in fetu*, wondering anxiously what the pangs of birth would actually be like. Like the torments of hell, perhaps . . . very possibly, in fact. It wasn't something he was looking forward to. It wasn't something he *could* look forward to—but women did it all the time, and by the time he had to do it, he'd be a woman too, at least for a while.

It wasn't simply that he had to become a mother in order to compete with his own mother. It wasn't that at all. It was the *fetus in fetu* whose needs had to be given top priority. Viable it might be, but it was facing a prospect that no proto-human individual had ever faced before in the history of the world. It had to be given every chance; he thought that he owed it everything he could give.

So he'd made his decision.

The trouble with informed decisions, he thought, *is that there's too much bloody information by half.*

Sometimes, he figured, a man just had to do what a man had to do . . .

That was all there was to it, really. ●

FOR THE KILLED ASTRONAUTS

I think you are the moons of Neptune then:
you shine silver and fall around a world.
Better: you are Uranus's rings spread thin
through emptiness: perhaps old moons, unfurled.
Knowing has flashed, burned, and, with a sharp report
spent itself in winter air. Nothing
remains but shards and ashes and bright, short
recollections; I cannot see the thing

in itself, only something—I know not what—
something silent and spinning, twirling, tied
like moons to moon paths—abstracted curves which plot
the outer edges of what you knew: to hide
from chances would be clinging to this ball;
in order to be free we have to fall.

—Tony Daniel

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THE GADARENE DIG

by Phillip C. Jennings

"Here he is again! The man from the *Beacon!*"

Laboring up the crevasse, I returned a sharp glance. Dr. Stang wouldn't be the first to make fun of my paper. My two-minute lecture on the New South rarely enlarged an educated Britisher's ideas. He had me pegged as a gum-chewing American provincial.

But I'd humor the gentleman if he obliged me. "You wouldn't be harboring un-Islamic potables inside that tent? Looking at relics is thirsty work!"

Abu Khayr pursed his lips in mock disapproval. "If all we had to do

art: Arthur George

Phillip C. Jenning's vivid tale of "The Betrothal" was our dramatic October cover story. His new tale is a rich blend of mysterious archaeological discoveries.

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is wander and look! Easy work! You Nazrany from the land of air conditioning, why don't you take me over to write for you? I can do local color, Oh Effendi! Such florid prose! I know the stuff you guys eat up. Half bloody Biblical, half sexy poetry—

'Listen to the tale of the reed flute,
Complaining of the pain of separation:
"Since they tore me from the reed-bed,
My laments move man and woman to tears—"' "

Dr. Stang laughed. "And why would you lament, Mr. Reed?"

"I'm a dry Reed now. An hour's hike in the noonday sun, and no shade but a burnt-out armored personnel carrier."

I crested the rise and stood before my bantering hosts. "Abu, the bottom's fallen out of the Bible-and-sex market. Burton and Lawrence are dead. Arabs are bad folks now, zealots with machine guns."

"You bet! So you think I stay here? Maybe okay if Jordan had some oil, but all we got is ruins from the Days of Ignorance, and crazy Englishers too poor to pay a decent wage."

"Blame it on American interest rates," Stang grumbled. "If the recession doesn't end soon it'll be goodbye to archeology."

I followed the pair into the tent. "That's my angle," I said. "The new archeology, doing more with less. Farewell to the grand old Schliemann days."

Stang snorted. He pulled out a bottle. "Sip this with respect. We don't shift to indigenous rotgut till July."

I accepted a glass and opened my notebook. "I found that cave you told me about. A mess of metal in front. It might have been a jeep."

"Did you go in?" Abu inquired.

"Well, I poked about first, checking for scorpions. Knowing you two it could have been a bad joke. Then, too, I wasn't happy about crawling in the dirt."

"You went in, though? What did you see?"

"Pottery shards. Walls plastered with clay, etched by some ancient cartoonist. There was this geezer like a snake . . . "

"Cartoonist!" Dr. Stang snorted. "They ARE cartoons. A story told in pictures, with narrative below."

"That writing . . . It's cuneiform, right? The same as the Sumerians used? Isn't this strange territory to find cuneiform writing?"

"You have to go back quite far," Stang agreed. "Certainly before the Egyptian New Kingdom. But before you ask more questions, let me remind you we've yet to work that site. Yon cave will cost money I don't have. It's really too bad. If the labs weren't committed to my work here I'd abandon this dustheap in a moment, and 'new archeology' be damned!"

"How can your work excite my readers if it bores you?" I complained.

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"All I'm doing is digging in sacred rubbish and posting bags of dust back to Cambridge. We'll analyze them for trace elements. Maybe we'll find a spot of unusually high molybdenum, or iridium, or selenium. Food for thought, eh?"

"Sacred rubbish?"

"The Decapolis became Greek under the Seleucids. In those days people looked to temples for meat. You had your animals sacrificed. Priest-butchers burnt bones and fat on the altar and marketed the flesh.

"For centuries the temples here had to deal with sacred ash. It was too abundant locally to have relic value, so they were obliged to cast it away. The priests used the same ash pit all those years. It's in good order. We're always pleased to find something perfectly stratified."

"I could play up the pagan temple aspect," I shrugged. "Unless you know something exciting about molybdenum."

"Sorry," Stang grinned. "That's one for the armchair boys."

I finished my drink. The scholar stood. "We all nap this time of day," he informed me. "Let's continue this talk at dinner tonight, eh?"

Dinner preparations began when it grew too dusky to dig. By the time Dr. Stang and I sat to eat the world was dark.

I bent forward. "I looked at the maps in my Bible. We're between the first and second tributaries, the Nahr al Yarmak and the Wadi al 'Arab. The only city of the Decapolis sited near here is Gadara."

Dr. Stang nodded. "Careful," he warned. "The night has ears."

"I was right! Do your workers know? They're all Moslems, aren't they?"

"It's been two thousand years! This dust is dust, that's all."

"I don't suppose they'd know the New Testament. They wouldn't know about the Gadarene swine. They wouldn't know what kind of animals were sacrificed in those Greek temples. They wouldn't know they were digging in pig dust—"

Dr. Stang winced. "Abhorrence of the pig stems back to the dawn of history. The pig is the only domestic food animal willing to feed on carrion . . ."

"What about dogs?"

"So who eats dogs? Chinese? Besides, dogs aren't hostile. Pigs are. They're irritable and intelligent, capable of defiant gestures. At some point a pig was seen eating a human corpse, and the witness began to wonder about last night's ham. Cannibalism by proxy! So the pig became a ghoul, an unclean beast to avoid at all costs."

I emptied my glass. "Do your workers know? What's their attitude?"

Abu stepped out of the darkness. His face shifted with the turbulence of his emotions. "No, we don't know, do we, Dr. Stang? Is this true? This dust we breathe and bathe in—"

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"Abu, Abu! Swine have been rooting and dying for tens of millions of years! Every molecule in these hills was once part of some prehistoric porker. In any event these temples were far more likely to sacrifice goats or sheep or pigeons. The only witness that anyone kept pigs is the Christian New Testament, and your ulema tell us how riddled with errors our gospels are!"

"I—I cannot ask my friends to labor in ignorance. I must tell them. They must be told before they start work tomorrow morning."

Dr. Stang rose unsteadily to his feet. "If you tell them, in an hour they'll have goaded themselves to violence! I know these people!"

Abu darkened. "I took a snake to my bosom, it bit me and now begs for protection!"

"Afford us a few hours. We'll pack off and spend the night elsewhere. Tell your men and when it's safe, tie a white rag to the wreck of that personnel carrier. Do that much for me, eh, Abu?"

The foreman turned to squint unfavorably in my direction.

I shrugged. "A job in America. It may not be a good job, but once you're in the States you'll have a chance to hunt around."

He smiled. "Okay. I try for you. You pack, and when the fire goes dead you take a hike."

We descended the cleft shortly before midnight. For a time neither of us spoke. I was grateful. I could imagine what a tongue-lashing administered by Dr. Stang might do to my feeble self-esteem. Why had I mentioned those Gadarene swine?

I was startled when my companion laughed. "Those boffins back in Cambridge," he blurted. "When we reach the stratum corresponding to 30 AD, and they test the ash of the animals cursed by Jesus Christ—"

"That's not likely. Those pigs drowned in the Sea of Galilee."

"He infested them with demons. It would be interesting to find a trace element corresponding to demon-possession."

"Molybdenum," I offered.

"Quite likely, I'd think. Yes, definitely. Molybdenum."

We passed the armored personnel carrier. "Where should we camp?" I asked.

"In that cave," Stang suggested. "A good place to hide, and shaded during the day."

"Have you deciphered the inscriptions on the wall?"

"Hardly. Let me tell you what's involved. First, I'd section them out and trace them to paper. Then I'd sit with a whopping big dictionary and go through the message word by word. I might understand the language, it's probably an old Northwest Semitic dialect related to Hebrew.

"Every word would have two or three meanings. That's where a spe-

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cialist has the edge over someone like me; after thirty years he develops a knack for the right interpretation. In my case I might labor over an entire winter to come up with a plausible rendering."

"I had something else in mind," I admitted. "I'd stand there with the flashlight and you'd translate for me as if you were reading the *Daily Beacon.*"

I looked behind us. A row of torches was descending from the Gadarene heights. "We'd better step up the pace."

We came to the slagged jeep, shoved our packs into a crack in the earth, and pushed through. Dr. Stang pulled out a flashlight and flicked it on. "Crawl in far enough so we can stand up."

"I hope Abu doesn't lead them directly here."

"Your Old South lynch mob transplanted to the New Near East. I doubt he told them willingly, but the fact is they're on our trail."

"Do you have a gun?"

"Yes. For that reason and because this place figures in local superstition, I hope they'll let us be."

I sat. Dr. Stang circled the passage, gazing at the illustrations on the wall. "Petitioners," he mumbled. "A man-snake seated on a throne. A row of eggs, or possibly pots. Tell me about snakes, Mr. Reed. Show me a sample of New South scholarship."

"The Sumerians had a hero, Ut—Utnash . . . Okay, the name escapes me. Anyhow, he went into the depths of the Abyss to find this snake. He was on a quest for eternal life, and the snake knew the secret.

"Then of course we have the serpent in the Garden of Eden, 'subtlest of the beasts of the field.' When a plague struck the Hebrews Moses had them cast an image of snakes on a pole. Ancient thinking associated snakes with health, wisdom, and longevity. Christian beliefs echo that idea by identifying the serpent with Lucifer, the bringer—"

Stang signaled for silence, put out his light and edged toward the cave entrance. After a minute he returned. "I heard a noise," he explained.

"So what do you think this place is?" I asked. "Headquarters of an old snake cult?"

"Perhaps."

I shivered. "This is like one of those low-budget thrillers. Bloodthirsty natives, lost ruins, a sprightly old scientist . . . you forgot to bring your beautiful daughter."

"If I had a daughter I'd hardly bring her to this quarter of the world."

He scrabbled off again. When he returned his voice trembled. "They're fetching trash to the entrance. I expect they'll build a fire to smoke us out. Either that or they plan to cover the hole and bury us."

"That does it. Abu's lost any hope of driving a cab in Atlanta."

"Have you got a cigarette?"

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"I don't smoke."

"The hero always smokes in those old films! I need something to burn. Matches, a lighter, anything!"

I patted my pockets. "Yeah, here. Here you go."

Dr. Stang used his flashlight to search for something flammable. He sighed and pulled a letter from his pocket. He rolled it tightly and held a match to the end.

The paper flamed briefly. He carried the glowing remnant around the tunnel, thrusting high and low. "I'm looking for a draft," he muttered. "If there's no draft their fire will use up all our oxygen."

His search was rewarded. Air breezed into our hiding place from the cuneiform-covered wall. Dr. Stang gave it a tap. "I'd say this is hollow. A slab screening a secret passage."

"I don't believe this. I'll wake up any minute now. 'Secret passages!' "

The clamor of excited voices penetrated into our lair. I took a sniff. The odor was unmistakable. I moved to Dr. Stang's side. "We've got to move this slab."

"These inscriptions are worth ten times your miserable life."

"Can you smell? They're pouring gasoline." Suddenly the air shook. "They've lit the fire!"

Dr. Stang bent and patted the ancient surface. Wind fluted from cracks in the façade. He brought out a knife and dug along the edge, outlining a rectangle the size of a tall file cabinet.

Using blades and fingers we chivvied the slab forward. With excruciating care we laid the thing face down on the floor. We were lucky, it ought to have broken. Few materials are more fragile than an unbaked slab of clay. Did the ancients fire their literary achievements? I was too distracted to ask. I shot into the narrow passage and reached back for Dr. Stang's flashlight. With British sangfroid the scholar went for our packs before joining me. Together we slithered between narrow walls and began a descent down shallow, uneven steps.

The air streaming past us stank of damp and yes, of smog. Curtains of mist swirled by. We came to thicker stuff and waded in. The masonry of the walls was etched. In fact the rock grew so cheesy that its hewn character was lost. Chemical erosion widened our passage, but left so much detritus that our stairs became a steep, uncertain ramp.

"It's getting warm," Dr. Stang commented.

"Acid, like on Clipperton Island. Divers exploring the lagoon felt hot and figured there was thermal activity. When they were hauled up they were red as lobsters. Acids from plant decay nearly ate away their skin."

Stang coughed. "Thank you. A few words of cheer are so helpful."

"Look at the walls. Look at the air. Don't your eyes sting?"

"Perhaps we should reconsider pressing on."

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I stepped in mud. My light showed water ahead. As best I could tell the tunnel was flooded. "Dead end," I muttered. I picked up a stone shaving and tossed it into the murk. It splashed.

"This may be a spring," Stang observed. "Interior stairs are common methods of access to springs. You build your fortress overhead so you'll have water in times of siege."

"I wouldn't drink this swill if my life depended on it. It smells like dead brontosaur."

I heard a second splash. Dr. Stang and I exchanged looks of wild surmise. We turned to quickstep up the mucky ramp.

It was slippery going. We'd retreated no more than twenty feet when a weight nudged my shoulder. "Enna!" a basso voice hissed in my ear.

Reflex took over; fight or flee. I scrambled forward, bowling into Dr. Stang. Over us loomed a blanched sinuosity. A dripping head nosed our torsos. Stang tore into his pack. Somewhere in there he had a gun.

The thing had a soft, rubbery face, reptilian only in bone structure. Its skin was white as parchment and its expression was that of a jaded Journalism professor I'd had in college.

Two eyes and a sea-serpent's jaws filled with needle teeth; these were hallmarks of normalcy compared to the snorkel that ruined the streamlined contours of its snout. As for the rest, it would take me too long to describe what I noticed in the seconds Dr. Stang used to find his pistol.

"Sheema! Anta toobee wa anna toobee!" the thing boomed. It had two Frankenstein's-monster fleshbulbs at the base of its jaw. They distended and grew pink.

I backed to Stang's side. "It's awfully big," I whispered. "A .38 slug might just make it mad."

"Anta eshban. Anna toobee, khobreem." It dawned on us that the creature was speaking. It enunciated the words carefully, spacing between each. The head swayed quizzically from side to side.

"Alduga ka innasum alduga eenasum," it continued. There was a phrasebook artificiality about the words, as if it were trying a less familiar language. It stared at us for a moment longer, then slithered backward into the smog.

Dr. Stang succumbed to a coughing fit. "I don't think I can stand up," he choked. "I'm shaking all over."

"Crawl then. Let's get out of here."

The monster caught up with us two minutes later. Its fleshy snorkel was wrapped around two black rods. It dropped them at our feet.

"It's friendly," I gasped.

Dr. Stang failed to respond. "Can you understand what it's saying?" I asked.

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No answer. I gave him a vicious poke. "Anta toobee wa anna toobee," the serpent obligingly repeated.

Dr. Stang groaned. Nobody looks good by flashlight, but I thought he seemed pale. Shock?

"Anta toobee wa anna toobee," I parroted. "My name's Reed." I pointed to myself. "Reed," I repeated.

"Ooluh Shashul."

"Shashul? Reed. Stang." I pointed. The creature's snorkel bent imitatively. The head lowered to nuzzle the black rods.

I picked one up. Glassy fuzz grew from the end. I found a button and touched it. The smog roiled in retreat. "It's an air purifier!" I exclaimed.

Dr. Stang slid up against the wall. He reached for the second rod. After a few seconds he spoke. "Sorry. I was in a funk for a minute there. I'll be better now."

"He tried to talk to us." Somehow "it" had become "he."

"Enna Stang," the serpent boomed. "Sheema! Anta toobee wa anna toobee. Shesh-shesh!"

" 'Anta' you, 'anna' me. 'Toobee' might mean good."

I pointed. "Anna-Reed-toobee. Anta-Shashul-toobee." I turned back to Dr. Stang. "Can you talk to him?"

Stang tried Hebrew. The thing's nose stiffened now and again. Greek made no impression. "This is basically one of your old Semitic monsters," Stang said. "Linguistically I'd put him around 2300 BC."

"Have you tried Sumerian?"

The scholar raised an eyebrow.

"They didn't teach you conversational Sumerian. What about names? Maybe he'd recognize a few names."

"Like Gilgamesh? Enkidu? Utnapishtim? Utnapishtim the immortal?"

With each repetition of "Utnapishtim" the serpent's snorkel stiffened. I studied him incredulously. "How old do you think he is? Ask his age."

They entered into a five-minute dialogue. Stang turned, blew his nose and shrugged. "He can't answer. I'm pretty sure he understood me, but I don't think he measures time by years."

"All that chitchat! I figured by now you were talking philosophy, comparing political systems—"

"Ah-AH-CHOO! Sorry. These purifiers take moisture out of the air. My sinuses are acting up."

"Rida khobreem!" Shashul roared.

"What?"

"Come down, men," Dr. Stang translated.

"Hey, you're good at this!"

"A two-ton dragon invites us into his polluted mud wallow. I think compliments are inappropriate."

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Shashul slithered off. Stang and I stood. We looked at each other. "He'll just come for us if we make a break for it," the archeologist spoke.

"Yeah, and then there's Abu and his friends." In truth I was too light-headed to put up a struggle. I was slaphappy; feverish, maybe. Lack of sleep, panic, smog—I had reason to feel feeble. I turned and tottered down the ramp.

We reached mud. Shashul was nowhere in sight. Suddenly a bank of klieg lights came on. We gazed over an illuminated pool maybe twenty feet wide.

"The perfect host," Dr. Stang commented.

"He's lonely," I answered. "He's been walled up since when? 2300 BC? More than four thousand years!"

"Lonely? You can't judge Shashul by human standards." We looked at each other and started to laugh.

Transports of hysteria gave way to storms of coughing. We recovered and stared over the milky water. It had transformed. I searched for words to describe the change. They came from high school physics.

"It's the index of refraction," I whispered through a raw throat. "Something's been done . . . "

Shashul burst from the far side. As he advanced his whipsaw motions excavated a ditch in what was now a large body of toxic gelatin.

We waded forward. Shashul's trench led into a great vertical shaft. "Home," Dr. Stang muttered.

Much of the shaft was under water, lights glowing in the depths. Girders of green glass supported platforms radiating from a central pole. Tar soldered the girders together. Tar carpeted the platforms.

Shashul slithered upward. We boosted ourselves to a higher platform, then to one completely dry. Fatigued and unwell, these small feats left us barely able to stand. Glops of gelatin oozed down our legs while our host made himself comfortable on a canopied throne.

We bowed. "Ask him what he finds to eat in here," I whispered. "Maybe we're on the menu."

Stang began to declaim, pausing now and again to construct the right phrase. Shashul responded.

"I was diplomatic," Stang muttered. "I asked why he'd been so kind as to fetch us here. He said he was curious about life in the 'lugalbanda' of men and women."

"Are there others like him? Is he alone?"

"God, my head aches! Let's see—units of measure. One snake. I'm not good at number words, they're not necessary. The old Canaanites used signs for numbers."

I stepped forward and waved a single finger. "One," I began. "One. One you? One anta Shashul?"

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The creature's knobs inflated. "Lam mika Shashul?"

"Verily, who is like unto Shashul?" Dr. Stang interpreted. Half-dead, yet he retained a sense of humor. "Reeba ma-eyat khobreem. Reeba ma-eyat eshtureem," he continued.

"Huh?"

"I remembered. The Paleo-Canaanites spelled out larger quantities. I think I told him we have ten thousand times one hundred thousand men and women."

Shashul made a series of pipping noises, then spoke again. Stang acted pleased. He nodded and replied with a heartfelt "En lam!"

"What?"

"He says we need to learn each other's language. I agreed."

That other needs were more imperative soon became evident. The last I remember I was struggling to master all the changes of tense possible in "the king weighs his copper."

I collapsed. Things got pretty nightmarish. Presumably Shashul nursed me: I was just conscious enough to appease the monster hovering overhead by shouting "malikum alilot kuperu."

When I came to I saw Dr. Stang sacked out at the other end of the platform. I tried to call his name, but my throat was too raw. I tried to sit. The effort made me dizzy. I slumped back to the floor.

Shashul slithered into view. "You too sick," he bellowed.

"Too," or "two"?

"Man-life evil for Shashul. Shashul-life evil for man-brother. Shashul give health to man Utnapishtim, big lugal Utnapishtim. Shashul give health to man Reed, okay?"

God, it hurt to speak! "Utnapishtum. Life, life, life. Never die. Yes?"

Shashul retreated without answering. I coughed and tasted blood. "En lam," I whimpered. "Help me. Hezer, hezer!"

Shashul roared an order. Two powerful arms picked me up. Another human!

As a toddler carries a cat, I was hauled to the edge of the platform and dropped to a level washed in inches of caustic water. My porter splashed to my side and picked me up again. He was beefy but pale. His face was craggy, his hair silken, white, and long. He sported a Ho-Chi-Minh beard. "Hey!" I croaked as he grabbed me a second time. "Be gentle! I'm sick!"

I don't think Uncle Ho understood. Shashul slithered by, turning back to boom a supplemental instruction. The fellow clamped his hand tightly over my face and stepped off the platform. We sank. Water flooded over our heads.

I was going to drown! I tore and struggled while my heart pounded in my ears. My lungs seemed ready to burst. Things grew shapeless—my

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brain wasn't going to waste energy analyzing sensory input! All was swirl, torment, and confusion!

I surrendered and tried to inhale. The man's hand was in the way.

Blackness.

When I came to I was blind. I couldn't move. My body had forgotten how to command its muscles.

A voice spoke, rich in timbre. The language was familiar, the speech of four thousand years ago. I had nothing to do but listen, and so in time I learned to understand.

I floated for weeks while my soul wandered through history. The speaker told me how the Fire Serpent descended from the skies in his great star-wagon to dwell on Holy Island.

I learned of the Kingdom of Many Islands, whose clerks Shashul taught to write on tablets of beeswax. On Royal Island lived the young king-to-be, a lad obliged to endure a great ordeal before he might rule. Shashul spoke against the ordeal and made an enemy of King Long-jaws, whose regime had been extended while his successor remained unready.

The voice spoke on. "Shashul made lenses for the chief of the clerks, that he might work through the evening of his life. The clerk was pleased, but as time passed he grew disturbed about the magic in the lenses, thinking it injured his soul. In his dotage he came to hate his benefactor, and spoke against Shashul. And all the clerks turned against Shashul, taking the side of Long-jaws . . . "

Shashul was forced to flee his crippled spaceship, first to the Island of Copper, and then to the Forests of Labanan. Everywhere his powers brought him to the attention of the nearest "lugal." Often he won favor, a creditable comment on human society, but then Shashul demanded little from humankind except a chance to live in peace. The problem was that in making friends he became enmeshed in a web of alliances and enmities.

Colors began to take shape. Uncle Ho of the resonant voice launched into an autobiography; how his people had a right to settle in the mud country of Sumer, because it had been theirs before the Flood. "And so I led them down, and we dispossessed the marsh-dwellers, and settled in Eridu . . . "

But he was a restless soul, not suited for kingship. He led an expedition of wood-cutters to the forests of the northwest, trekking alongside the Great Cold river. There he heard of the Serpent and sought him out.

Shashul swam into view. "You can see!" he exclaimed. His voice was even louder than before. Understandable, I guess, since we were all under water.

I didn't answer, nor did the creature expect me to. "I unmade all the

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parts of you that age or sicken," he explained. "All except your brain. To unmake your brain would destroy your memories.

"Now you are growing together, only in a better way. My serpent-brothers of the far heavens were born in this better way, so we could live the lengths of time necessary to travel from star to star.

"Brother Utnapishtim I made over. Other man-brothers asked to be born again, and I gave them long life. Even in their children the gift sometimes showed itself.

"You have questions. If I knew what they were I would answer them. In a few days you'll be complete again. Then we can exchange all we know. You'll be the happier for it, I assure you!"

The interruption destroyed my companion's train of narrative. When Shashul left he began another story. The Akkadian Empire had called upon itself the wrath of a hundred gods, and so the Guti invaded and the sons of Naram-Sin were killed.

The local area was occupied by refugees. The crumbled regime no longer shielded them from the people of the north.

"The elders spoke together and said, 'they must not befriend the Serpent, or they will gain wisdom and live in happiness.' They hid Shashul, building a hill to bury the temple by his well, and surrounding the place with curses such as cause rocks to fly and fires to flame. These curses Shashul had given Naram-Sin in the old days, and now they used them, saying they wanted to protect Shashul.

"Since then we are ignorant of all that has happened. There are no more stories to tell."

He fell silent. Time passed. He launched into a repetition of the Many Islands story. He was like a tape recorder; rewind and play, rewind and play.

I put together a chronology. 4500 BC; the folk of the Aegean learn to use copper. The Kingdom of Many Islands would have been marginally more recent, maybe 4000 BC.

Uncle Ho may have lived in pre-literate Sumer, before 3000 BC.

Dr. Stang dated Shashul's vocabulary to around 2300 BC.

Naram-Sin's empire, when had it flourished? Who were the Guti? Who were these people of the north?

Why had my companion sat placidly under a hill of dirt all this time? He must have undergone rebirth. What did immortality do to a person?

The time came when I could move again. I looked at myself. White, wrinkled bathtub skin; nothing uncanny.

Uncle Ho helped me out of my jar. I expected to be buoyant, but my

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lungs were full of water. I was the new improved version of myself, I could breathe the stuff. In slow motion I settled to the floor.

I spoke. "What's your name?"

The man stared. "Your name?" I repeated. I knew the language by now. Water distorted the sounds, but even after modulating my voice he remained mute.

Shashul swam into the room. "Can you answer, friend?" he asked. "Can you speak your name?"

The man blinked. "Ut-na-pish-tim," he responded.

Shashul's twin bulbs grew pink. "Good! Good, Utnapishtim! You've done well!"

"Is he . . . What's wrong—"

"I could not remake his brain without killing his memories. His brain is fifty lifetimes old. Many brains scarcely survive one lifetime. Utnapishtim retained some ability to learn until his tenth."

"What? Seven hundred years?"

"I suppose so. Your brain is made of infinitesimal parts, little—"

"Cells." I used the English word. "We've made some progress. We understand more of the universe and the laws of nature."

"Good, and without my help. I did wonder whether my efforts were necessary. Most of what I did seemed futile."

I spoke again. "There are ways to communicate to the stars. The message takes many years, but you had time. When your, uh, 'wagon' crashed why didn't you call for help?"

Shashul swayed from side to side. "Tell me, when your brothers listen to the stars, do they hear anything?"

"Intelligent messages? No."

"After my accident I sent word. I listened for a reply. I knew the times to listen, they had to do with the distances of the stars.

"As I listened the stars fell silent, a few, then many, then all. I grew frightened, very frightened."

He sank moodily to the floor. Time to change the subject. "Where is Dr. Stang?" I asked.

"I give men and women the choice. You asked to be healed. Your brother asked to be taken above. Utnapishtim carried him into good air. Being here made him weak, but if his strength returned he would be well now."

"I should check up on him."

"NO! I gave you health so you might stay and talk. Lecture me on all you know of the world. It may be the only world of intelligence in all the heavens, and I need to know about it."

"Start listening again. This last fifty years we've been telling our story to the stars."

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"You have? I wonder if that is wise."

"I'll give you what I know. That may take a few days. Books would serve better. We have books of history—"

"Yes! Bring books. A fair exchange, immortality for books. Can you do this? In the old days there were dangers above."

"There are dangers still. As many as ever, I'm afraid." I began to describe the modern world.

The Gadarene heights were drier and hotter than ever when I climbed to Dr. Stang's tent. Abu stood on the edge of the crest. He turned and disappeared.

Dr. Stang was inside, sitting in his pajamas, addressing envelopes. He looked up. "Mr. Reed!" he exclaimed.

"I'm glad to see you alive."

"Oh, they took me back. After what they'd done they felt repentant. I'm pretty well now. I still cough up a bit now and again . . . "

I looked around. "Got any books you can spare? If my credit's any good I'll write you an IOU."

"Going to learn a little archeology?"

"They're for Shashul."

Stang put down his pen. "That name," he whispered. "Look, I don't know what strange vapors we inhaled, or why you've been gone since then, and I'm fairly sure I don't want anything to do with stories of underworld monsters. We can be friends, but only on that basis. I have a reputation to think of."

I laughed. "And I don't? You underestimate the *Beacon* if you think they'd print my adventures."

"So it's agreed? Shashul's our secret?"

"For a while. Say a hundred years or so."

Stang turned and rummaged through his shelf. "That's it, then. Here's where it ends. A blanket of silence—Silence? From a newspaper reporter?"

Dr. Stang was right to be skeptical. Scarcely two years have passed. The thing is, I keep thinking of Shashul's terror as he spoke of all those stars falling silent. We've been filling space with radio signals for two generations. At certain wavelengths Earth glows brighter than the sun. Who's going to notice? Is someone out there preparing to take steps?

I'll never talk the electronic media into folding up shop. All I can do is put a few paranoid people on alert. If you're getting tired of acid rain and the Bomb, here's something new to worry about. You have a serpentine Robinson Crusoe keeping you company.

He says we have maybe twenty more years. And I was *so* looking forward to immortality! ●

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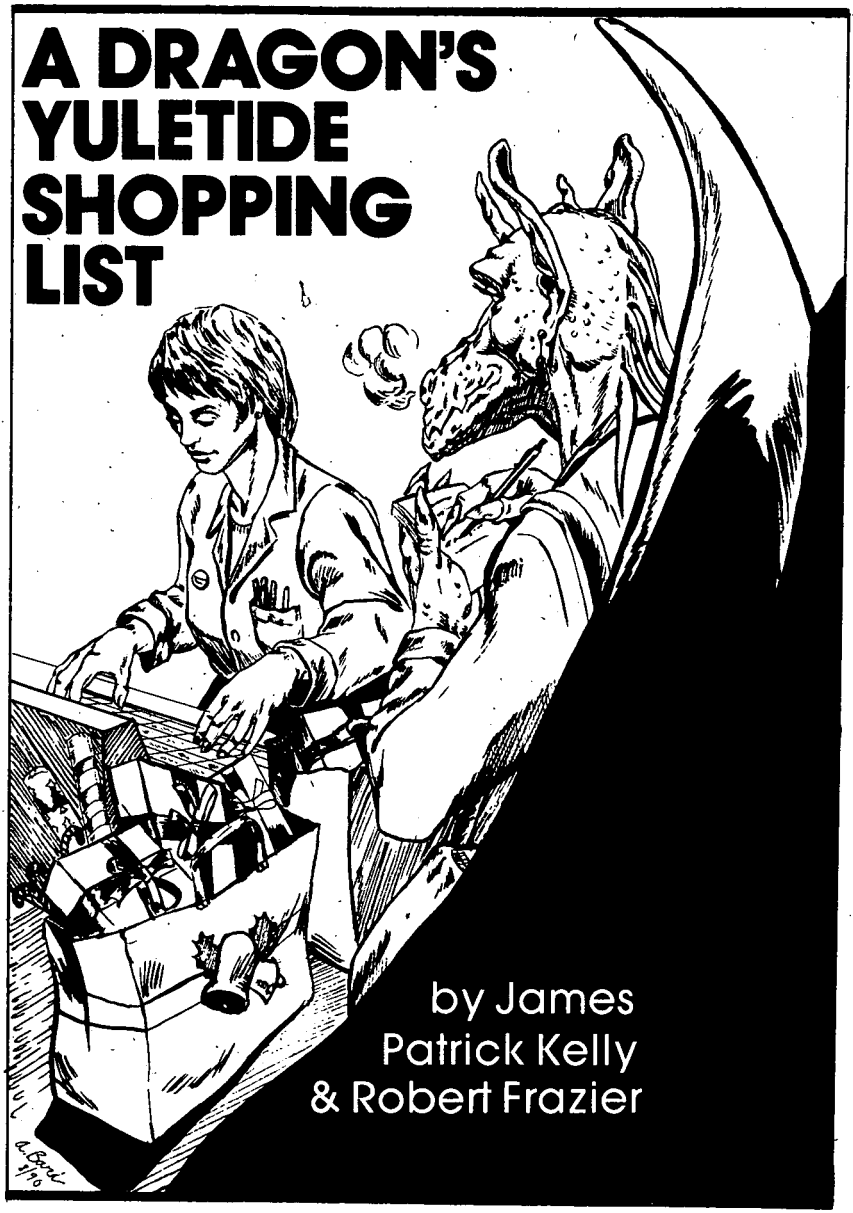
A DRAGON'S YULETIDE SHOPPING LIST



by James Patrick Kelly & Robert Frazier

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Fruitcakes for those who can't come:
Sis and Lambton, visiting his folks
in Death Valley.
Poor Grandma in the hospital
recovering from her incinerectomy.
Young Mung
who's up for parole again
in February.

For my darling Reg:
That red silk smoking jacket
we saw in Neiman Marcus
another Krugerrand for his hoard
and a dozen extra virgin maidens
assorted.

For Mom:
A blowup of Dad at the Kilauea eruptions
where he dips his tail in the lava pool
and butters himself for protection
against the salt sprays
and nerdy disaster tourists . . .
he's so tacky.

For Dad:
The new *Siegfried* on CD
Von Karajan conducting the Berlin Phil
he loves to root for losers
like Fafnir and the Red Sox.

For Christmas Eve:
One bale, chestnuts
Mom bakes
her gingerbread Tokyo

and Dad's famous punch
Ingredients:
three gallons unleaded
two gallons nitro
five of crude napalm
pinch of powdered magnesium
Flavor straws

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HOOPLA

by Mary Rosenblum

An exciting and dangerous tour across the eastern Soul Gate and beyond, they may not resolve their differences, but they will rescue each other.

art: Pat Morrissey

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More than an acre of mylar film rippled over Damian's head, thin as a spider's weaving. The warm, northwest wind, blowing straight from Australia's deserts, began to falter. The genoa jib shuddered, fluttering like a silver wing in front of the mainsail.

"Windspeed's down to eleven knots," Paul called from the trimaran's computer console. "I hope one of your automatic systems kicks in before that sail collapses."

"It will," Damian yelled back to his son. "Haven't you listened to *anything* I've told you?" The expression on Paul's face reminded Damian sharply of that reserved and uncommunicative teenager who had walked away from him to enter the Space and Aeronautics academy ten years ago. Paul might be in the US solar propulsion program, but he still *acted* like that sulky teenager, as far as Damian was concerned.

Perhaps Paul was making a point—that he was only interested in the wind from the sun. Damian pressed his lips together and searched the ocean swell for signs of a freshening breeze. His son had never been willing to waste his time on the sea.

Stifling anger, he ducked beneath the taut main boom and walked aft, moving easily along the tri's narrow, kayak-shaped center hull. Graceful, hollow wings arched out on either side of the main hull, like a gull, caught on the downstroke of flight.

Let Paul turn up his nose, Damian thought. I'll beat *Warakurna* and prove my Autocrew to Pat Garret and Tanaka-Pacific, once and for all. Damian clenched his fist, trying to recapture the *focus* he had had at the start of the race. It had vanished. He opened his hand slowly, inspecting his salt-roughened palm. Paul had dissolved it.

He swung down beneath the plastic weather-bubble that protected the cockpit and leaned over Paul's shoulder. "We can take another three tenths drop in windspeed before she starts to luff." He watched the wind die on the flat screen of the sailboat's master monitor. Three days out of Sydney. They were more than halfway to the finish line of the Designer Cup race at the mouth of Kaipara harbor—and to the heliplane that would take Paul to the Platform shuttle. He scanned the ocean swell.

"*Warakurna's* slatting." Paul pointed at the Australian entry, north of them. "Look at her sails flap."

"She may be the top contender, but she can't take the light wind like *Gossamer*." Damian nodded. "If we get into heavy air, though, she'll leave us behind."

"You'll win." Paul's expression was enigmatic. "Don't you always get what you want?"

"No!" The word burst out, startling them both.

Paul looked away, his lips tightening.

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The sail rippled with a dry crackle and Damian squinted into the afternoon sun. The wind was coming. He could smell it.

"Cancel the automatic reef," he snapped.

Paul glanced up dubiously, but said nothing as he keyed in the command.

If the wind dropped to four-point-five knots and he hadn't reefed, the mylar film would start to slat and it might tangle. Surface charge would stick the micro-thin film together like old fashioned plastic wrap, and the charged-fiber ribs wouldn't be able to exert enough force to straighten the enormous sail.

Sweat prickled in Damian's armpits. Five-point-oh-three knots. He was gambling, betting the race on his nose for wind instead of letting Autocrew make the decisions. Or was he trying to prove something? Four-point-seven. The wind veered around to NNW and picked up with a sudden gust. The silvery film of the enormous mainsail fluttered and filled, and the triangular genoa bulged.

Damian let his breath out in a gusty sigh as stress codes raced across the screen. Made it. Small electrical currents stiffened the fiber ribs, unfurling even more sail.

"That was close. I wouldn't be first pilot long, if I cut it that fine on the *Clarke*." Paul didn't look at him.

Damian heard criticism in his son's words and flushed. "I've been sailing boats since before you were born," he snapped. "If you'd ever bothered to learn, you'd have seen the wind coming."

It was a lie. He had gambled. Don't start another fight. This isn't why you invited Paul along. Damian glowered at the *Gossamer's* filmy sails. They had been manufactured by null-g technology up on the Platform—an offshoot of the solar-sail program. Those silvery, space-born sails might win this race for him, but they would steal Paul. The journey to Tau Ceti was a one way trip. The *Clarke* wasn't coming back. Suddenly, he hated the silver film, with an intensity that made his stomach churn.

"Your Autocrew is doing a great job," Paul said, a shade too enthusiastically.

"Your mother believed in space as the Great Frontier and what did it get *her*?" Damian's fist smacked the slick plastic hull. "A plaque up on the damned Platform."

"I know the risks," Paul said tightly. "So did she."

"Did she?" Damian glared at his son.

The monitor beeped and both men jumped.

"It's calling for a two percent increase in sail area." Paul turned to the screen with relief.

"So do it. If you can remember how." Damian turned away. Out on deck, the winches hummed, reeling out more line as the electrical cur-

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rents flowed and more sail unfurled. "Bring her in closer to the wind," he commanded. "I want to give that factory ship plenty of room."

The Japanese-flagged vessel, big as an aircraft carrier, flew the corporate flag of Tanaka-Pacific. I helped make them the biggest, Damian thought, but the sense of satisfaction had faded long ago. The bright young kids were taking over, full of fresh ideas and impatience. He watched a hoverplane lift from the ship's deck, loaded with fish meal.

"Most of the Platform's aquaculture tanks are adapted from your methodology," Paul said, following Damian's gaze.

Damian said nothing. He touched the helm control, and the *Gossamer* rounded into the wind, briefly tilting the port hull clear of the water. The wind gusted suddenly and the trimaran leaped under them, surfing down the face of the waves, bows in the air.

"Damn." Paul grabbed for a handhold.

"We're well ahead of Pat and *Warakurna*." Damian eyed the taut curve of the carbon-filament mast, feeling a small satisfaction at his son's reaction. "How's your stomach?"

"Okay." Paul moved fractionally away. "Believe me, anything the waves can do, null-g can do better." He grimaced. "Is the mast *supposed* to bend like that?"

"Uh huh. That's how it can handle the big sail." He glanced at the satlink's screen. It displayed weather info and the positions of the other contestants. "I told Pat that Autocrew would beat him with its long-range strategy." Maybe Tanaka-Pacific would listen to him now.

"You're really into this new, computer-assisted boat design." Paul shot him a sideways glance. "What happened to that thermal-vent project?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Damian kept his tone casual, eyes on the screen. "They put Lescaux in charge."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?" Damian scowled, aware of his gray hair, colorless as driftwood. "I'm not dead *yet*. There's still plenty for me to do, right here on Earth." God, here I go again, he thought and closed his mouth.

Bent over the monitor, Paul didn't answer. His hair was gingery—Mira's hair. Paul looked so much like her. Damian still remembered the day the solemn, red-headed three-year-old had stepped off the shuttle. That had been a week after the accident. My son, he thought. And hers. Damian watched the stress codes scroll across the main monitor, not really seeing them.

You're chasing dreams, he had told her, on that last sailing weekend together. *The Platform's just a job with a bad safety record.*

It's a first step for all of us, she had said. The sea wind had whipped her red hair into her eyes. *You don't have to come.*

He hadn't come, and she had ended up a sacrifice to someone's stupid

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miscalculation of hull stresses. Whose mistake is going to kill *Paul?* Damian thought. He clenched his fists, glaring at the silver wings of *Warakurna's* sails. On a reaching course like this, stresses pushed to the limit, *Gossamer* was making good time. Was he winning or losing? The race and Paul's upcoming mission blurred together in his mind and he couldn't tell.

The boat skipped over the crest of a wave in a crash of spray. "It's a rough ride." Paul looked pale, but stood easily enough, stretching his compact frame. "I'd hate to be on this thing in a storm."

He was trying to smooth things out. "She bounces worse in a light breeze." Damian hated the casual words. This chit-chat wasn't what he wanted, but anger kept rising up between them like a thick sheet of glass.

They had never been very close. Damian busied himself running a check on Autocrew. The factory ships and the flimsy, subsea domes had been dangerous—no place for a child. On vacations, Paul had never cared about sailing or the sea. If he talked at all, it was orbital velocities and Dyson spheres.

"Juice?" Paul was rummaging in one of the supply nets.

"Please." Damian cracked the seal on the plastic packet Paul handed him. The liquid was too sweet and artificial, full of nutrients. He grimaced and emptied the packet in three long swallows.

"Look, Damian." Paul braced himself against the plastic curve of weather-bubble. "Let's stop this bickering, okay?" He lifted his hands in a placating gesture. "I know you don't approve of what I'm doing, but maybe we can put it behind us for awhile." He lifted one shoulder in an awkward shrug. "Just for these last couple of days?"

"It's *your* choice, isn't it?" Damian crumpled his empty juice packet. "To leave on this suicide mission? Why shouldn't we talk about it?" He glared up at the cloudless sky, to where the Platform hung invisibly above them in its geostationary orbit.

It was more city than platform now, a vast manufacturing and tourist extravaganza. And somewhere at the periphery waited the *Clarke,* its micrometer-thick sails ready to unfurl for its long flight.

"*Suicide.*" Damian enunciated the word carefully. "Why don't you admit it?"

"How many times have we been over this?" Paul sounded tired. "It's too late now."

"You've got plenty of backup people who could take over for you. Damn it, look *around* you." Damian ran a hand through his thinning hair. "We're just starting to tap the sea's resources and we've barely touched the planets. Isn't there enough for you here? What the hell are you

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looking for—some adolescent adventure fantasy?" He was yelling again. Damian clamped his lips together.

"Tau Ceti has at least one carbon-hydrogen-oxygen based planet." Paul was folding his empty juice packet into smaller and smaller squares. "There's not much here for us, in the solar system—not in the long term. We can live on Phobos and Mars, if you want to live with life support or bio-modification." He raised his head and his hazel eyes were opaque as salvage gold. "It's time for us to tip over our cradle," he said. "Someone has to take the first step."

Mira's words. "Even if it takes you a dozen lifetimes to do it?" Damian cried. "The damn system's eleven light years away and you don't know if you'll even find anything once you get there."

"Five years," Paul said evenly. "That's all the time I'll spend outside of stasis. If there's nothing there, we'll look somewhere else."

"If the stasis doesn't fail. If a meteorite doesn't get by the laser sweep and put a hole in the hull. If. If. *If.* You could drift around until you die of starvation or old age." Damian clenched his teeth so hard that his jaws ached. "Who's going to care?" he grated. "Who's even going to remember that you tried?" Why you? he wanted to shout at his son. Why the hell do *you* have to do it?

"Let's just drop it." Paul tossed the tiny wad of plastic onto the console table. "I'm tired of arguing."

"Yeah." Damian took a deep breath, struggling for calm. "I'd better concentrate on the race."

"Good idea." Paul's relief was guarded. "I'll go check the telltales on deck."

This trip wasn't working. There didn't seem to be anything but anger between them anymore. Damian stared at the blinking codes on his monitor. Maybe Paul was right. Maybe it *was* too late. The breeze was still gusting between NW and NNW, and Damian felt the tiny shudder as the moveable keels tilted on the outboard hulls to counterbalance the shifting force of the wind on the sail. This is my last chance, he thought.

"Come up, quick." Paul's excited shout came from the bow. "Dolphins."

Damian scrambled out of the cockpit and hurried forward along the center hull, ducking beneath the taut main boom. Paul had flattened himself along the bow. He pointed.

Three wild dolphins leapfrogged off *Gossamer's* bow, cutting sleek arcs through the air. "Dolphs always look like they're playing." Damian squatted behind his son on the narrow hull. "You don't see wild ones much, anymore."

"We had some Auggies, down on the subsea training base," Paul said. "They were pretty smart."

"I've never liked the augmented dolphs." Damian shrugged. They

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seemed taut, frantic, as if they were poised between sanity and insanity. "We don't even understand the dolphin mind," he said.

Paul tensed, anticipating another lecture. The bow slapped down into the trough of a wave and salt spray beaded his face like tears.

"I saw a whale once," Damian said. "A sperm whale."

Paul rose cautiously to his knees, shading his eyes. "I thought they were extinct."

"They might be, by now. It was a long time ago." Twenty-six years ago, on his final weekend with Mira. "It looked old," Damian said. "And tired." Towering over their tiny sailboat like a blotchy, barnacled mountain, it had eyed them for a timeless moment. Then it had opened its enormous jaws and slid gently beneath the waves. Its wash had nearly swamped the little boat.

"Your mother was there," Damian said. *You* were there, too, he almost said. Mira couldn't have known she was pregnant yet.

Would I have gone? he wondered. If she had told me? Damian cleared his throat, wiping stinging salt water out of his eyes. Would it have made any real difference? The construction site would still have decompressed, after all; but maybe . . . *somehow* . . .

Paul touched his arm suddenly. "I wish you'd come to see the *Clarke* launch," he said. "The sail is beautiful—an enormous silver wheel, turning slowly in front of us, blotting out the stars. We'll start slow at first, but the momentum is cumulative, so eventually, we'll approach the speed of light." He watched the dolphins, his face luminous. "We call it the ark. A million fertilized ova—everything from lobsters to man." He turned his shining, golden eyes on Damian. "Dolphins, too. It's a chance at immortality, Dad. For all of us."

Paul hadn't called him Dad since he was ten. "Nothing lasts forever." Damian stood up on the slick hull. "There is no such thing as immortality. You can die here, or you can die alone a million miles from home."

The light faded from Paul's face, leaving it dull and cold. Damian watched him retreat aft, stooped and awkward on the narrow hull. He scanned the gray swell, but the dolphins had disappeared. A million miles from home, or on a geostationary platform not all that far above the Earth.

In either case, death was the bottom line.

"You'd better check the sat-link," Paul told Damian when he finally climbed down into the cockpit. He sounded edgy. "The barometer's down to .993."

"Weather's coming." Damian scowled at the barometer. He was letting Paul distract him from the race.

Wispy cirrus clouds trailed up from the horizon, stained peach and

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rose by the setting sun. He should have noticed the change. "A storm," he said. The sat-link showed the collapsing high-pressure system. A big low was sliding south, pushing squalls ahead of it.

"Great." Paul's shoulders hunched uneasily. "I hope it's not a bad one."

"We're safe enough," Damian said. "Autocrew'll keep us on course, and even if it doesn't, we've got an onboard Locator." The Locator! A terrible, wonderful idea popped into Damian's head, and he dropped onto a bench to hide the sudden flush of his excitement.

Without the Locator, search and rescue operations would have to depend on satellite observation and heliplane sweeps. Searchers would estimate a boat's position from wind and known course data. But what if *Gossamer* changed course under the cover of the storm clouds? Autocrew could keep them afloat through the storm—Damian believed in his program and his boat.

Without a Locator, they could be lost for days.

Three days would be enough. The *Clarke* would be gone. They wouldn't hold the launch just for Paul. Damian's pulse was racing and he forced himself to relax. Did he dare? It was a risk, but not too great a one, if he didn't permanently disable the Locator. "Paul, would you check the mast telltales?" His voice sounded remarkably casual in his ears.

"Sure." Paul reached for the ladder. "As long as you don't want me out there during the storm." He gave a brief laugh and disappeared over the weather bubble.

Damian dropped to his knees in front of the sat-link, fumbling with the watertight seals that protected the electronics. Heart pounding, one eye on the ladder, he opened it up. There. That was the board he wanted. He removed it from its slot and hid it in a watertight supply locker. Now, *Gossamer* was nothing more than a single tiny boat on a very large ocean. Not even the satellite eyes would find it easily, if they didn't know where to look.

He'd make sure they didn't know.

Damian resealed the sat-link's housing and threw himself down on the bench as Paul started down the ladder. A gamble. He took a deep breath. It was a gamble that might save his son.

"It's getting pretty wild out there." Paul looked apprehensive. "Everything seems fine."

Damian nodded, suppressing a smile. Already, the waves were getting steeper, sliding past the *Gossamer* like dark, glassy hills. The sun sank, staining the sea with its blood, and the Platform appeared in the darkening sky. It glowed briefly, like a pile of spilled jewels, before the clouds swallowed it.

Damian broke out the insusuits, and while Paul struggled into his, Damian entered the course corrections. Paul didn't know Autocrew well

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enough to suspect anything. The storm felt like a big one. It should drive them well out of range of a search sweep. Outside, a school of small squid shot by, glowing milk-white beneath the surface. The boat plunged through the waves with a heavy, labored roll.

"You've never been up to the Platform, have you?" Paul's face was a shadowy oval in the blue glow from the monitor screens. "You've never seen the memorial."

"No." Damian entered the final changes in Autocrew. Mira had made her choice. He had made his. The wind gusted suddenly and the boat shuddered.

"Hey." Paul half rose. "The sat-link screen is blank. Did you turn it off?"

"Damn." Damian scrambled over to the console with a credible display of concern. "It's dead. Our communication is out." He frowned. "Can't do anything about it until the storm lets up," he said. "If a wave came in over the bubble while I had the housing open, it would blow all the electronics."

"Great." Strain tightened Paul's voice. "So now we're on our own."

"That shouldn't bother you. You'll certainly be on your own on the *Clarke*," Damian said dryly. "You're relatively safe down *here*. Autocrew will keep us close to course, and even if we go off, they'll be able to find us by the Locator signal."

"I hope you're right." Paul's face was sober. "The sea reminds me of space—vast, and completely unconcerned whether we puny humans live or die. You gave me a good understanding of that, as a kid, you know. It's helped."

"I thought you hated the sea." Damian felt disconcerted.

"No." Paul looked suprised. "I never hated it."

The monitor beeped a soft alert as the wind gusted violently. *Gossamer* heeled sharply, lifting her port wing clear of the water, and red blossomed on the monitor screen. The first breath of the storm.

"Whoa." Paul hung onto the console table. "It feels bad."

The bow lifted like a rearing horse, slapping down into the waves with a crash, and the wind rose from a growl to an angry scream.

"It'll be all right," Damian yelled. "*Gossamer* can take it."

He hunched over the main monitor as the hours crawled past and the storm showed no sign of easing. Autocrew was performing perfectly—making a thousand tiny adjustments in sail and keel each minute, keeping the boat on course, in spite of the storm. Too bad *Warakurna* would win. Red stress codes blinked like baleful eyes on the monitor. Damian felt the storm's power vibrate through the hull as it hurled them farther and farther away from discovery. Even if Tanaka-Pacific dumped Autocrew, he would have saved his son.

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Sometime after midnight, the wind veered from NNW straight around to the SE. The main boom swung across the deck, winches screaming, sail filling with a hollow *whump*. The *Gossamer* shuddered and tilted, starboard wing rising clear of the water, graceful hull thrumming with strain.

Paul yelled something as he and Damian tumbled sideways, slamming into the port wall of the cockpit. For a tremulous instant, *Gossamer* balanced, undecided. A wave broke over them and icy seawater splashed down into the cockpit.

Would she broach or right herself? Damian held his breath.

With a groan, *Gossamer* decided, crashing down into the wild sea, nosing her center bow straight into the side of the next wave. It slid across the deck in a welter of foam. More water slopped into the cockpit and the pumps whined as she shuddered and staggered upright. The monitor glared with red codes, but *Gossamer* was still afloat.

"Something's wrong." For the first time since the storm had begun, Damian felt a touch of fear. He flung himself into the console chair, fingers flying across the keyboard as he overrode Autocrew and keyed in more reefs to further reduce the sail area. Still too much sail for this wind. Sweat prickled beneath his insusuit.

Gossamer shuddered beneath another fierce gust, and the monitor beeped frantically.

"The genoa's still up," Paul yelled from the ladder.

"It can't be." Damian scrambled up beside his son, clinging to the rungs as the boat plunged into a wave trough that looked deep as the Grand Canyon. "I keyed it down, first thing." Damian stared in disblief. Beyond the reefed mainsail, he could just make out the silver bulge of the big genoa.

Damian cursed as he dropped back into the cockpit, fear a cold fist in his belly. A jammed winch? Fouled line? The windspeed was forty knots, gusting to sixty. With that much sail, they would go over. He keyed the drop command again, but Paul shook his head. It was still up.

The tri's triple hull shot out over the crest of a small mountain of water, smashing down into another trough. The port hull lifted, bounced hard. The boat groaned and the monitor went wild.

"I've got to get it down by hand." Damian was already scrambling up the ladder, snapping a lifeline onto his safety harness as he went.

He could feel Paul on the ladder behind him as he stuck his head above the shelter of the bubble. "Stay here," he yelled back automatically. "I'll get it."

The wind hit him in the face, snatching the breath out of his lungs. Windblown spray stung his face like hail. The boat bucked under him,

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bow leaping out of the gray-and-white water, crashing down in an explosion of foam and spray.

He didn't dare stand up. Hands numbing in the cold seawater, boots scrabbling for purchase on the wet deck, he worked his way forward on hands and knees. Twice, wild waves broke over them from the starboard quarter, nearly tearing him loose from the hull.

The wind shrieked in the rigging and the mast shivered. The boom was taut with strain in spite of the reefed mainsail. Damian ducked under it, clutching the handholds with aching fingers. He reached the winch that controlled the genoa's foot, hooking his legs around the base. He'd have to put it on manual and operate it from here.

The cable felt hard as a steel rod from the strain of the overstressed sail, and the manual release refused to budge. He pried at it, expecting the *Gossamer* to heel over and broach at any moment. The deck tilted under him, steep as a mountain slope.

The boat surfed down the face of a huge roller and slammed into the trough. It felt like they'd hit a brick wall. Damian gasped as the winch clicked into manual mode, but it *still* wouldn't budge. Damn. Where was the foul?

Swearing, Damian spotted it—a twisted loop of cable above the main feed. He strained at the twist, working by sight, fingers too numb to feel anything. It gave. He cranked and the cable spun out. The sail flapped wildly as the wind spilled over the slackening edge, cracking like pistol shots.

He had to get it down before it wrapped around the stays. He crawled forward, beneath the foot of the whipping genoa. He was out near the bow here. The hull narrowed to less than a meter, bucking like a bronc beneath his knees. One moment, he was three meters above the waves; the next, the hull crashed down and water exploded up around him.

Another sea slammed into the boat. Damian's foot slipped and he fell flat on the wet plastic. Don't go overboard. Hang on! The main winch didn't stick and, miraculously, the sail began to drop, twisting in the wind. He grabbed an armful of slick film, blinded by spray. Crank. Reach up and haul in the folds, before the wind could tangle them. Crank, reach, fold. Crank. Reach. Fold. It became mindless, aching monotony. There were a million square miles of sail to furl and the wind snatched viciously at the film, trying to tear it out of his hands.

A plastic grommet caught him on the cheekbone and pain lanced through his jaw. Damian pulled in the last armful; as he struggled with the wet film, a wild wave caught the bow from the side, slamming into the boat like a freight train.

As *Gossamer* nosed into foaming water, something smashed into Damian's side. Flotsam—a piece of wreckage or a rotting treetrunk—he never

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saw it. He lost his grip and the wave swept him casually off the bow. Cold water closed over his head and Damian fought the urge to gasp for air.

His left side was numb, his arm useless. He groped for his safety harness with his right hand, forcing down panic. His fingers closed over the taut lifeline and suddenly, he was on the surface, bouyed by his insusuit.

He gasped air and choked as a wave slapped his face. He was only a dozen feet from the hull, but he couldn't haul himself in single-handed. I should have let Paul come out with me, he thought numbly. I always have to do it myself. The *Gossamer* rushed through the stormy darkness, pulling him along. Damian cursed himself as his hand slipped. Something hard banged his fingers.

The safety snap. Cold panic shot through him. He had snapped the line to only one ring of his safety harness and it had pulled through the loops in his suit. If he let go, he would be lost in the storm.

His hand was numb. He clenched his teeth. He could barely feel his fingers. In another minute, maybe two, he would lose his grip. He slid up the foamy slope of a wave. The suit could keep him alive for hours. How long would it take them to find him?

Too long. They wouldn't know where to look. The bitter irony choked him as the sea tossed him casually over a wave-crest.

I'm going to die, Damian thought. Paul too, if *Gossamer* and Autocrew couldn't handle the storm. Wind shredded the waves. A mountain of water slid over him and for a terrible moment, Damian thought he had let go of the line. I wanted him to stay, because he's all I have left. I let Mira go alone and I shouldn't have. The thoughts darted through his mind like fish. I want Paul to stay because I'm old. Because I'll be alone. Damian's head broke the surface and he gasped for air. Miraculously, his fingers were still locked on the line, but he couldn't feel them at all.

Too late now, he thought. Too late.

He didn't feel Paul's hand on his wrist. It wasn't until his son's fingers dug into his armpit that he made out the shape of the boat and Paul's straining torso. His son had followed him, after all.

"Help me!" Paul yelled. His shoulders bunched with effort. Damian kicked hard, clutching the cable of his lifeline with every last ounce of his waning strength. Slowly, Paul pulled him closer. A wave crest slid over them and Damian squeezed his eyes closed. His knuckles scraped the hull and another wave caught him, lifting him almost onto the deck. Paul hooked his fingers into the useless loops of Damian's suit and heaved him out of the water.

Safe. Damian lay flat on the slick hull, shuddering.

"Come on," Paul yelled in his ear. "You've got to get below."

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With a groan, Damian made it to his knees. The boat tried to throw him into the water, the wind tore at him, and even with Paul's help, it was a million terrible miles back to the cockpit. By the time he slid down the short ladder, he was exhausted. Every breath was a scalding agony.

"Your Autocrew's doing great." Paul unsealed Damian's suit and probed his shoulder and side with cold fingers. "*I'd* sink us, for sure." In spite of his light tone, his face was drawn and anxious.

"We're still afloat." Damian gasped as pain stabbed him.

"You might have broken some ribs, but your shoulder seems okay. I should have gone out with you." Paul's face twisted and he turned away to reach for the first-aid box. "I thought I'd lost you," he said harshly.

"I'm the one that got lost," Damian mumbled. He leaned back against the hull, trying to make his eyes focus on the monitor.

The storm was starting to die. Only a few red stress codes winked from the screen. A pain patch dulled the agony in his side, but every roll of the boat hurt. "I could have gone up to the Platform with your mother," he said.

"You had your job with Tanaka-Pacific." Paul's voice was rough. "Don't go into that now."

"No. It's important." Damian struggled to sit up, fighting the fuzziness of the drug. "They asked me to set up the Platform's aquaculture program. It was a big offer." He looked into his son's face, seeing Mira in every curve and shadow. "I was *afraid,*" he whispered. "The Tanaka-Pacific job was safe. I knew the ocean. No one knew if we could even build the Platform . . . and I was afraid."

"Everyone has to make their own choices. You're the one who told me that." Paul draped a thermal blanket over Damian.

"Did I?" The drugs blurred Damian's words. "After the accident, I kept seeing Mira in your face. I kept thinking that things . . . might have been different. If I'd gone with her."

"I made you feel guilty," Paul said softly. "That was why you were angry."

Damian nodded once and let his head droop, hurt by the sad acceptance in his son's tone. Does he know me that well? Damian thought with a wrench. I don't know *him.* "I've always been afraid," he said. "Afraid to love you, because I might lose you, too." Tears ran down his face and dripped off his chin.

"Dad?" Paul's eyes were dark as amber. "I love you. I haven't always acted like it—you had such a reputation that I always felt like I was standing in your shadow." He half smiled. "Maybe that's why I joined the space program." He slid his arm around his father. "You gave me a book about the sea for my sixteenth birthday," he murmured. "You'd

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written a poem on the flyleaf—from Shakespeare—I've never forgotten it." He chanted softly:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

"It's inscribed on the *Clarke's* hull," he said. "We'll take it with us."

Damian leaned back against his son's shoulder. Why did I write that? he thought. It had been one of Mira's favorite poems.

"You'll have to fix the Locator." The words cost him an effort. "Or they won't find us in time. I hid the board in the number four locker. It'll restore communications, too." He looked away from his son's widening eyes. "I told myself that I was doing it for you," he said. "But I was doing it for myself. And I nearly killed us both." He bent his head, feeling tears gathering behind his eyelids again.

"It's all right," Paul said huskily. His arm tightened around Damian's uninjured shoulder. "I understand."

The heliplane settled down next to *Gossamer* in the bright midday sun. Light sparkled on the gentle swells and the silver sails flapped in the still air.

"Well done, chaps." A sunburned woman in a military coverall leaned out of the cockpit door. "You came through the blow better than most of the boats." She tossed them a line. "Too bad they canceled the race on you." She sounded Brit, looked Eurasian, and eyed Paul with undisguised interest. "We brought the medic along," she said brightly. "Who's the patient?"

Besides the medic, the plane was full of other military types wearing the gold and black Solar Propulsion insignia. "We're on a tight schedule," an officer explained while the medic taped Damian's ribs. "A solar-flare prediction upped the launch schedule. If the storm hadn't ended when it did, a backup would have had to take Paul's place. Are you sure you can get back to Kaipara on your own?" The officer looked concerned. "I could leave someone with you."

"No need," Damian murmured. "Autocrew does all the work." So close. He looked into his son's face. A few more hours and Paul would have *had* to stay. There was so much he hadn't had time to say.

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune . . .

"Dad?" Paul stood in front of Damian, his posture stiff and awkward. "We'll be launching as soon as I get on board." He swallowed. "Wish me luck?"

Damian shook his head, remembering the light in his son's face as he

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talked about his ark. Immortality. "You said you could leave someone here to help me with the boat." He turned to the officer.

"I could do it, sir." A lanky young woman saluted smartly. "I've sailed since I was a kid."

"Could you take her back on your own?" Damian found he was holding his breath.

"You bet." Her eyes gleamed as they slid along *Gossamer's* sleek hulls. "Any time."

Paul was looking at Damian, his eyes bright.

"Maybe you'll have time to show me the memorial," Damian said. Everyone had to make their own choices, good or bad. I hope you find what you're searching for, he thought, and put an arm around his son's shoulders.

"Too bad about the race," the officer said. "Maybe you'll win the next run."

"I won *this* one," Damian said. ●

METAFOSSIL

If mountains are the tracks
of whatever walked the world
when it was wet,
and if it was humanshaped,
it stood 360 miles high
and strode
if it strode humanlike,
120 miles a stride,
covering a ball 208 strides around,
which would make Him/Her,
the Gardener of the Gods,
roughly the size
of a Disney workman
moving over fresh concrete
to plant models
in an earthshaped diorama
two football fields around.

—William John Watkins

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by Lewis Shiner

"Wild for You" is an eerie tale of an unusual afternoon on a Texas highway...

art: Roger Raupp

It was a Pontiac Firebird with a custom paintjob, a metal-flake candy-apple red. The personalized plates said WILD4U.

I was right behind her on that big clover-leaf that slopes down off Woodall Rogers onto I-35. The wind caught a hank of her long blonde hair and set it to fluttering outside her window. I saw her face in her own rear-view as she threw her head back. Laughing, or singing along with the radio, or maybe just feeling the pull as she put the pedal down and scooted into the southbound lane.

She was a beauty, all right. Just a kid, but with a crazy smile that made my heart spin.

I whipped my pickup into fourth but I couldn't get past this big white Caddy coming up on me from behind. The two lanes for Austin were

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fixing to split off in half a mile. An eighteen-wheeler filled up one of them and the Caddy had the other. I eased off the gas and watched her disappear over the horizon, a bright red promise of something beyond my wildest dreams.

It was mid-afternoon, sunny with a few clouds. The weather couldn't decide if it was summer or winter, which is what passes for fall in Texas. I wasn't but a kid myself, with my whole life in front of me. I put Rosanne Cash on the tape deck and my arm out the window and let those white lines fly by.

I was at the Fourth Street Shell station in Waco, halfway home, when I saw that little red car again. I'd just handed my credit card to the lady when the squeal of brakes made me look up. There it was, shiny and red, rocking back and forth by the Super Unleaded.

I kept one eye on it while I signed the receipt. The driver door opened and this guy got out. He was in jeans and a pearl button shirt and a black cap. I can't say I liked the looks of him. She got out the passenger side and leaned across the top of the car, watching the traffic. I couldn't hardly see her because of the pump. I hung around the ice cream freezer, hoping she'd come inside. Instead the guy came in to pay cash for five dollars' worth.

I followed him out. She turned to get back in the car and I felt a chill. Her hair was shorter than it had been, just barely past her collar. And her face looked older, too.

I couldn't figure what the hell. Maybe she'd got her hair cut? She'd had time, as fast as she'd been driving, and as long as we'd been out. I felt like I'd already spent half my life on the road. Or maybe this was her older sister and she had borrowed the car somehow.

Weird, is what it was. I got back in the truck and hit it on down the highway. About two miles on they came up behind me to pass, and that's when I saw the license had changed. Now it said MR&MRS.

Right as they pulled up next to me I looked over at her. She was staring out the window, right at me. She pointed a finger, like kids do when they're making a pretend pistol. And smiled, that same crooked smile.

For some reason that really got to me. I don't think I'll ever forget it.

Some things are just Mysteries, and you don't expect to understand them. When I passed that car south of Belton, there were different people in it. The woman driving looked like the blonde girl, but was old enough to be her mother. There was a dark-haired girl in the passenger seat, maybe thirty years old, and two little kids in back. The dark-haired girl was turned around to yell at them. The speed limit had gone back up to 65, but they chugged along at 60. The plates were standard Texas issue

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and there was a bumper sticker that said ASK ME ABOUT MY GRANDBABY.

Tell the truth, I was too tired to think much of it anymore. The sun had started to set and I had this pinched kind of pain between my shoulders. About thirty miles on I saw a roadside rest stop and pulled in.

I might have slept a quarter of an hour. The sky had clouded over and the sunset lit everything up pretty spectacular. It was being thirsty woke me, and I gimped over to the water fountain on stiff legs.

Luck or something made me look back at the highway. That metal-flake red Firebird pulled off at about thirty miles an hour, just barely rolling. The old lady was by herself again. While I watched she hung a left turn under the interstate and disappeared.

I had my drink of water. An ambulance screamed on northbound, siren going and lights flashing. After a few seconds, the lights went out and it crested a hill, headed back the way we'd come. ●

MAYBE TOGETHER

Vacations on Mars
  and nuclear-powered cars
  and TWO HUNDRED MILE-AN-HOUR FREEWAYS
That's the way the Future went—
Away from this planet at
One Hundred and Eighty-Six Thousand Miles per second
Enough to get you a ticket on any highway.
And now that the Future's gone
I'm back at the ol' drawing board
and I don't know quite what to do.
I fiddle with my T-square and my pens,
and make collages of current magazine covers,
no, no, that won't do—
Not another version of the future
as a distorted present.
Maybe I'll get another cup of coffee
and wait for my neighbor to come by.
Maybe together we can jump-start
the Future.

—Don Webb

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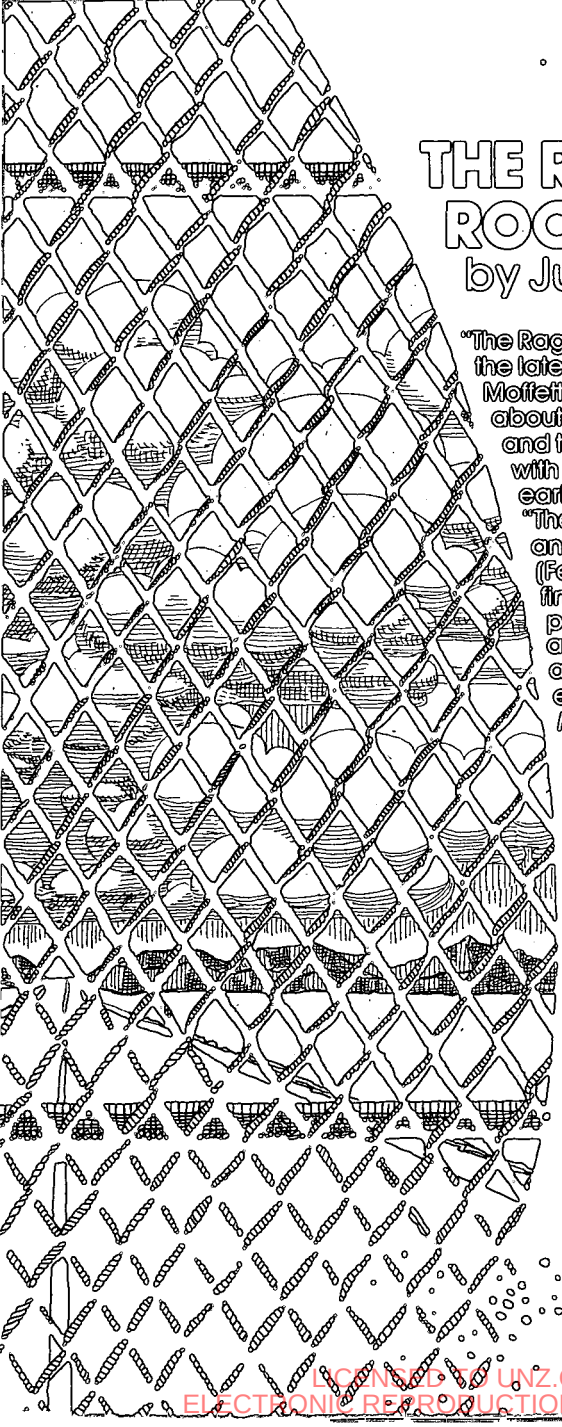

THE RAGGED ROCK

by Judith Moffett

"The Ragged Rock" is the latest tale in Judith Moffett's series of stories about the alien Hefn and their interactions with humanity. Two earlier Hefn tales, "The Hob" (May 1988) and "Tiny Tango" (February 1989), were finalists for the prestigious Nebula award. A novel about the Hefn, entitled *The Ragged World*, will be available from St. Martin's Press in February.

art: Janet Aulisio

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For the longest time Liam couldn't seem to get it through his head that Jeff was dead. The power plant meltdown that had killed his friend five days after Liam's own twelfth birthday had also, by making his part of the world uninhabitable, completely disrupted his life. "Disrupted" was really much too mild a word; the life he had been living and taking for granted was finished forever, irrecoverable. Liam's school, due to open a few days after the accident, would now be closed for keeps. He and his mother and father were living in Jeff's family's vacation place in the Poconos. Liam had spent parts of a number of happy summers there, but he couldn't get the idea of being at the cabin on Lake Wallenpaupack, and the idea of Jeff being dead of radiation poisoning, to fit together in his mind; it just didn't make sense that he himself could be alive and Jeff not be somewhere in the world.

Liam's older sisters were there with them for a while, but then Margy went back to the guy she was living with in New York, and Brett went off to college at Penn State, where she was starting her sophomore year, and it was just the three of them again.

His parents were worried about him, he knew that in a dazed, abstracted way, but they had a lot of other things to worry about as well. Their house with all its contents—books, clothes, furniture, china, photograph albums, videos, pictures, carpets, knickknacks, the piano, his baseball glove, his computer, everything—was so contaminated that they would never be able to go back there again. They had some clothes and papers with them, and his cousin Carrie's solar car, and that was it. His father's job, as a systems analyst for a firm called Smithkline Beecham in Center City, was suspended for nobody knew how long. His parents didn't know where they were going to live when they left the cabin. They were waiting for the government and the electric company to sort things out between them, which seemed to be taking quite a while. So mostly they left him alone.

That was fine with Liam. He sat on the dock for hours and hours, staring at the water. On rainy days he sat on the porch and stared at the rain, or pretended to read. If he held himself very, very still, inside and out, he could keep the fact of Jeff's death at bay.

The only time he allowed this program to be altered was the day Jeff's father, Terry Carpenter, showed up at the cabin. Liam hadn't known he was coming, and when Terry came walking down to the dock, and Liam looked up and saw him, the most horrible feeling he had ever felt in his life rammed through him like a sword; he actually screamed. Without deciding to at all, he had jumped up and shoved past Terry, and was off the dock and running as fast as he could along the lake shore, away from

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the cabin. He sprinted for a whole mile before the pain in his lungs forced him to slow down. All afternoon he hung around the far side of the lake, and when he finally worked his way back to the cabin, because it was getting dark, Terry had left.

That evening he could feel more of his parents' anxiety than usual turned toward him, and his mother cried again. But they didn't try to make him talk about it or reproach him and, in a numb way, he was grateful.

Weeks passed. It got colder, then really cold.

From something he overheard his father say to his mother one day, he learned that Terry and Jeff's mother, Anne, were getting a divorce. Liam wasn't surprised; they hadn't been happy together, there was some basic friction or disagreement there that used to rasp on Jeff. Anne was going back to California. That was okay by Liam. Anne didn't much like him anymore, and didn't, hadn't, liked Jeff to be with him all the time. When Liam was little she used to like him fine, but something had happened to change that after Jeff's father went to live in Washington and flatly refused to move his family down there with him. Jeff hadn't wanted to go anyway, even for the chance of being a chorister in the Washington Cathedral Choir. But Anne had never been the same after that, nor behaved the same toward Liam.

Terry was in Washington now. He was a Pennsylvania State Representative, a Congressman, running for the Senate and likely to win because of the stunning way he had masterminded the evacuation of Philadelphia after the meltdown, and maybe also because of the fact that he had lost his only child in the disaster. Liam's parents told him one morning at breakfast that they were going to live outside Washington, D.C. too, in an urburb in Maryland called College Park, near the city. Terry was arranging things. Liam found that the thought of seeing Terry in Washington didn't upset him. He found that he didn't mind the idea of moving to Maryland. He didn't care at all what they did. He simply didn't care.

The day they finished packing and were cleaning up the cabin, the day before they were to leave, was the day the alien ship appeared for the third time.

(These aliens, hairy dwarves with short, oddly jointed legs, who called themselves the Hefn, had first visited Earth in the year 1623. Some members of the ship's crew had started a rebellion, and Earth had been a convenient place to maroon them. One group of mutineers had been put off in England, another in Sweden. The intention had been to teach them a lesson, not to strand them permanently; but mechanical difficulties and time dilation had combined to delay the ship's return for

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nearly four centuries—a long time even for the extremely long-lived Hefn.

In 2006 the Hefn ship had finally reappeared in the solar system. A Hefn delegation landed, searched for several months, and finally succeeded in locating traces of the Yorkshire group (and also in nearly precipitating an international crisis). But then they had gone away, apparently determined to have no further contact with humanity at all.

When the Hefn returned anyway four years later, immediately following the meltdown at the Peach Bottom Nuclear Facility, there had been a shift of power aboard the ship. The faction now in command announced that it meant to save the fouled nest of Earth from its own hatchlings, using whatever means proved necessary. Without fuss or difficulty the Hefn took control of the world.

For most people the effect of the Hefn presence on Earth was indirect and slight, at least in the beginning. Jeff Carpenter's father, Terry, was one of the very few who dealt directly and frequently with the aliens. For him, and for those close to him, their being around made a big difference.)

2013

The interview wasn't going very well, but Julie didn't seem easily discouraged. She smiled a lot, and she was smiling now. "And you've been living in College Park how long—two and a half years now, more or less?"

"About that. We moved down here from Philadelphia right after Peach Bottom."

"Why did your parents decide to come here?"

Liam shrugged. "My father's company had an opening in the Washington office, and we had a good family friend here, and he offered to help us find someplace to live and get settled in."

"I see." She made a note. "Is this family friend someone you're close to?"

He shrugged again, then wondered if he was being rude. He didn't want to go that far. "His name's Terry Carpenter. You've probably heard of him."

"The Senator?" Liam nodded; Julie made another note. She was sort of nice-looking, shoulder-length black hair and no makeup and a big-nosed, good-natured face. She was wearing a black skirt and vest and a long-sleeved white blouse of some silky fabric, and her shoes were plain black pumps with an inch or so of heel. Liam forgave her for the heel; she was shorter than he was, and he was certainly no giant.

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Julie looked up. "How does your family happen to know Senator Carpenter?"

"My father's cousin used to be his English professor at Penn, and then he and his wife moved a couple of blocks away from us in Philadelphia—well, Haverford, really—before we—before I was born."

He tensed, expecting her to pick up on the slip, but she only said, "It must have been a terrible experience, losing your home and being uprooted without warning from your whole life."

Liam looked at her, his face a mask. Then he looked at his watch.

Julie said in a pleasant, neutral voice, "Tell me about the accident. What did you do?"

"I was in the middle of a ball game. My mother heard it on the radio and came and got me, and we drove up to the Poconos—the Carpenters used to have a cabin up there."

"Could you tell me how you felt and what you were thinking about as you were driving up to the Poconos?"

Liam sat up straighter in the director's chair and said, "Look, I know what you're trying to get me to say. You want me to say I was thinking about Jeff, but I wasn't. I didn't know anything about where the bus was at the time and we all just assumed he would be okay. We didn't find out till the next day that the whole choir'd been taken to the hospital."

Julie's face and body became very still, as if each separate muscle were under control. "Jeff is your friend who died?"

"I don't want to talk about it," said Liam firmly.

A line appeared between Julie's eyebrows. "What about your school—would you feel like talking about that?"

"What about it?"

"I was just wondering whether you liked it."

"It's okay. Quaker schools are all the same, really. They're tough and they leave you alone."

"And you like people to leave you alone."

"Yeah." This came out as a tired sigh.

"Why's that?"

"It's easier that way."

Julie moved again, smiled and crossed her legs, briefly flashing the tops of knee-high stockings under the black skirt. "I think you're saying you'd rather *I* left you alone."

Liam managed to smile weakly back at her. "I'm sorry, it's nothing personal. The thing is, this wasn't my idea. My parents are making me do this."

"And you consider it . . . . unnecessary? Boring?"

"It's a bother. I don't want a shrink, I really just want to be left alone."

Julie wrote what seemed to be several sentences on her yellow pad.

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While she was writing she asked, "What do you do when you're being left alone?"

"Play the piano. Read. Do math problems." Jerk off, he thought to himself, but I'm not telling *you* about *that.*

Julie unclipped the pad and flipped through several pages of white paper that had been secured beneath. "According to this you're something of a math prodigy—taking a course in calculus here at the university this term, is that right? That's very impressive."

Liam shrugged again before he could stop himself. "Math's always been easy for me." He checked his watch again. "Time's up," he said with audible relief, and popped out of the chair.

Julie laid the clipboard in her lap and gave him a steady, attentive look. "Yes it is, but Liam—sit down again a minute, please—before we stop I want to make something clear. Nothing will happen here that you don't want to happen. I promise not to put pressure on you to answer questions you don't want to answer, or say things you don't want to say. All right?" This time he stopped the shrug in time, and merely nodded. "All right. Then I have one last question for you today, which you can answer or not, just as you please. Are you happy?"

He was startled, not just by her having asked it but by the question itself. He hesitated, then said guardedly, "Well—no."

"Wouldn't you like to be?"

Frustration and outrage swelled his chest tight, an aerosol-bomb feeling, very destructive to his balance, his careful control. "That's just not *possible!*" he blurted. "You don't know what you're talking about—you don't know anything *about* it!"

Julie stood up. "I see. Well, maybe next time you could try to explain it to me."

When Liam got home from the Counseling Center he went straight to the piano, throwing his books in the corner and his coat on the floor. He settled on the bench with a grunt of relief. For the next hour he disappeared, first into Scott Joplin and then into some improvisations of his own.

When he came to the surface again, his mother and Matt were in the kitchen fixing dinner, his father's study door was closed, and his second cousin Carrie—the one who had been Terry Carpenter's teacher long ago—and Terry himself had cleared the flotsam off two chairs and were talking quietly together in the living room. They looked up and smiled when Liam came in, but their identical expressions of badly masked apprehension irritated him. He was so heartily sick and tired of being the focus of everybody's concern. He lifted a hand to them, grabbed his

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bookbag by the strap, and went up the stairs two at a time to his own room on the second floor.

Liam was a tidy boy; he had always kept his private space neat. The books were straight on the shelves, the bed made, the desk and floor clear of clutter. Except for a small bulletin board with a few cards and pieces of paper thumbtacked to it, the blue walls were bare. Shut into this refuge of clarity and order, Liam worked methodically at his desk — calculus, then a little English—until his father called him down for dinner.

Talk around the table was general. Terry, as head of the Senate Committee on Alien Affairs, was heavily involved with the Bureau of Temporal Physics set up by the Hefn and spent a lot of time with the one particular Hefn, whose name was Humphrey, assigned by the Gafr to direct the project. His name wasn't really Humphrey, of course, but all the Hefn had names that ended in *-frey,* and this one's real name sounded more or less like Humphrey. So that's what people had been told to call him. He had been on the job more than a year, and would have to return soon to the ship for a hibernation break; he was taking special drugs now to counteract the sleepiness that was the normal Hefn response to cold weather. Terry would miss him; they worked well together and had in fact become friends—something that wasn't (Terry had learned from Humphrey) even supposed to be possible.

Liam's whole extended family, except for Liam himself, was fascinated by all this. His father and Carrie thought the Hefn takeover more a blessing than a curse; his mother and Matt were less enthusiastic; but they all loved hearing the latest about Humphrey and the other Hefn. Terry was always more than welcome whenever he could manage to get out to College Park for dinner.

After the divorce, after Anne had remarried out in California, Terry had become a semi-permanent member of the household. He even had his own small room now across from Liam's on the second floor, where he kept a few spare articles of clothing and toiletries and pajamas, so he could sleep over on the spur of the moment when he liked. There was a picture of Jeff and Liam on the wall, enlarged from a slide Terry had taken on a camping trip when the boys were nine and ten. They were both hunkered down, cooking something on a backpacking stove set on the ground, and grinning up at the camera. Both of them looked like their hair hadn't been combed in days.

Liam never went into Terry's room. When Terry wasn't there, Liam kept the door closed.

It was Terry who had found this big house with the wrap-around porch, on a street that dead-ended at the College Park Metro Station, and inviting Carrie and Matt to move into the third floor had been his idea

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originally. Those two, vacationing in England at the time of the accident, had just stayed on in Cambridge for the whole next academic year, since their house, like Liam's family's house, would never be habitable again, and since the University of Pennsylvania, where they both taught, was closed. Then Terry had made inquiries and pulled a string or two, and the next thing Liam knew Carrie had a job at the University of Maryland, Matt was retired, and the two of them had come back and were settled in upstairs.

The arrangement worked fine. Matt was a very good cook, which was a big help to Liam's mother, and Carrie and his father had always been good friends, the way cousins sometimes are. As far as Liam himself was concerned, whether they lived in the house or in an igloo in Antarctica was all the same to him. It was strange to remember, and he seldom did, that his cousin Carrie had once been one of his favorite people in the world.

When Terry had been pumped dry of Humphrey gossip and lore, Carrie entertained them all with a sample of wacky mistakes that had turned up on student papers over the years: "we had a hare's breath escape," "it's a doggy-dog world," and so on. Matt added a few from his own collection. When everybody finished laughing about that, Liam's mother spoke about his sister Brett, who had just heard unofficially that she'd landed a research assistantship to Cornell. Brett was especially delighted and relieved because it meant that next year she would be up in Ithaca with her boyfriend, who had gone there on some fantastic scholarship the year before, instead of off by herself in Santa Barbara or someplace. The boyfriend's name was Eric Meredith. He was supposed to be some kind of whiz kid in biology. Liam's parents liked him, though his mother thought him much too thin.

Nobody asked how the counseling session had gone, but Liam could feel the curiosity just steaming off of the four adults, all the time they were speaking of other things. For a minute he felt sorry for them. They all cared so much and wanted to help so badly, when there was nothing in the world anybody could do. Then this feeling was replaced by the more familiar one of aggravation at the burdensome pressure of their love. He had agreed to start seeing a counselor in hopes that some of this pressure would thereby be relieved, but it seemed to have merely changed in nature without diminishing at all. He cleaned his plate and drained his glass without really noticing what either had contained. As soon as he could, he excused himself and went back up to his room.

After a while he was not surprised to hear footsteps on the stairs, followed by a deferential knock. Liam made a hideous face, but got up from his desk resignedly and opened the door. Terry and Carrie were

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standing in the hallway. "Mind if we come in?" Carrie said, and Liam stood aside to let them pass, hoping the grilling would be short.

But it appeared that his parents hadn't sent them up to pump him about the counseling session. Carrie sat on the neatly made bed; Terry took the easy chair and Liam sat back down at his desk, and even before he hit the seat of the chair Terry was saying, "The two of us have been putting our heads together, and we've decided there's something you ought to know."

They were waiting for him to respond, both wearing very sober expressions. Liam thought *Big fucking deal,* but all he said was "Well, okay. What?"

Terry shot a glance at Carrie. Carrie leaned her elbows on her knees and said, "Sweetie, you remember the story about the mating deer, don't you?"

"Sure."

"What exactly *do* you remember about it?"

"Just that a long time ago, when Terry was in college, you guys were sitting on the Old Ragged Rock one Halloween Day and two deer ran up the hill and got it on, right down below you. You used to tell us—tell about that all the time, on those tea and doughnut hikes."

Another slip. He could see Carrie carefully not letting her face show that she had picked up on it, and suppressed a flash of irritation. "Well," she said, "did you ever wonder what Terry and I were doing together in the park that day?"

For a second Liam's face, though he didn't know it, lost its polite-robot look. "No, now that you mention it. I guess I just assumed you were going for a walk. And that you were friends, like you are now."

Terry shook his head. "We hardly knew each other. I was just a so-so student in Professor Sharpless' modern poetry class, before that day. We were there because I'd had a kind of hallucination during an exam, of having seen something very strange in the park. When Carrie graded my paper she realized something was wrong. We were up on the White Trail trying to reconstruct what might have happened to me when I'd been out there the previous Sunday morning, before the exam. Are you following this? I'm trying to summarize."

"I guess so."

"To make a long story short, it turned out that while I was sitting up on the Ragged Rock that Sunday morning, trying to think of something to write a paper about, all of a sudden a time window opened, right up the hill behind the rock."

"You mean . . . transmitting, like from when *after* the Hefn came?"

"From the year 2020. We know that for sure. I was looking up the hill, and suddenly there was a place that looked like summer in the middle

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of the fall landscape, and two figures in radiation suits were looking out at *me.*"

Liam felt a little wakening of interest within himself, a sensation so unusual that he absently took note of it while he was still talking. "What year was this—what year were *you* in, I mean?"

"1990. It was my junior year. They wiped my memory; if I hadn't written that exam just when I did, I doubt I'd have ever remembered it—I'd have been like Jenny and Frank Flintoft over in England, you know; they saw some of the stranded Hefn on the moors years ago, but didn't remember what they'd seen till the ship came back the first time and they saw the landing party on TV."

Liam nodded; he knew who the Flintofts were. They'd been written up a lot at the time of the first brief Hefn visitation in 2006, and Jenny Flintoft had been at Penn before she married Frank. They were the ones Carrie and Matt had been over visiting in August of 2010, when the accident had occurred at Peach Bottom.

"Actually," Terry was saying, "*I* might not have remembered even then. The Hefn in the time window was wearing a radiation rig—I never actually saw what he looked like, so I'm not sure whether or not the memory would have been triggered like Jenny's and Frank's were, just by seeing the Hefn delegation. Unless one of them had put on a rig just like it."

"How come the exam made you remember?"

Carrie said, "There was a question on it about deer—or rather two poems, one about a dead doe and one about a moose, that the class was supposed to compare and contrast. *They*—the characters Terry saw—were using the time window to try and see some deer, and Terry's unconscious mind must have made the connection."

"My gosh," said Liam, "how come I never heard about this before?"

"Nobody's heard about it except Carrie and Matt—and Anne, who never believed a word of it—and Jenny and Frank." He paused. "I never told Jeff."

Liam blinked. "And not Mom or Dad?"

"No, not them either. Anne might have said something to Phoebe, I guess, but I never did."

"Oh," said Liam, "because they wouldn't have believed you, and everybody would think you were crazy."

"That's exactly it. The worst time of all, though, was in 2006, when the ship came and then left again. See, Liam—I'd been told that day in the park that there would be a power plant accident *before* the Hefn got here. So when they did come—but there still hadn't been any accident—I didn't know what to think."

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"Oh. I get it. You'd never think they might leave and then come *back*, would you," said Liam slowly. "Nobody would. I wouldn't have either."

"Funnily enough," said Carrie, "it did occur to Jenny. She mentioned it just before she went back to England to marry Frank, that day we went out to the park together. But only as a solution to the conundrum, mind you. A theoretical solution; none of us had the remotest idea the Hefn really might turn up a second time. Well—third time, really."

Almost to himself Liam said, "Twenty-twenty and radiation suits. So it was after the meltdown. So that's how come you had the evacuation all planned out." Terry nodded, waiting tensely.

Slowly Liam went pale. He stared at Terry. "*You knew* there was going to be a meltdown."

Terry, now very pale himself, locked eyes with Liam. In a tight voice he said, "You want to know why I didn't bring Jeff and Anne down to Washington with me, like Anne wanted me to—why I insisted on keeping Jeff at Germantown Friends with you." Liam nodded. "God knows I wish, more than I could ever tell you, that I'd let Anne have her way about it. You know Jeff didn't want to leave Philadelphia, but of course if I'd put my foot down he wouldn't have had much choice. The truth is . . . the real reason I kept him up there is that I wanted him to be with you—and that I was positive he'd be safe with you."

Still staring, breathing rapidly, Liam said, "Why did you think he'd be safe with *me?*" Was it his fault then in some terrible way that Jeff was dead? This was very dangerous ground. Liam could feel the cords by which he held himself together seriously threatening to snap, but he had to know the answer to that question.

"Because," said Terry, "the other figure in a radiation suit, that I saw in the time window with the Hefn, *was* you."

Liam hardly ever dreamed about Jeff. He would sometimes be jolted awake, as if someone had dropped him from about four feet above the mattress, but hardly ever could remember what it was, what images or voices, that had jerked him out of sleep in such an alarming way.

But that night he dreamed that he and Jeff were back with Carrie in the park. They were climbing the White Trail toward the massive boulder they called the Ragged Rock, atop which they would drink their tea and eat their Dunkin Donuts. Always the same doughnuts: one rainbow doughnut for Liam and one with something else on top, chocolate or coconut, and for Jeff one sugary jelly doughnut and one fat glazed one that always got a little squashed in Carrie's backpack. The dream-trail, like the real one, was narrow, and they climbed in single file, Carrie in the lead wearing the backpack, Liam following Carrie, and Jeff—puffing

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noisily—bringing up the rear. Liam was himself, but was also younger, perhaps nine or ten.

It was a sparkling fall day. The sky was a deep, brilliant blue, and brown and yellow leaves curled like seashells had drifted deep in the path, so that Liam kept stubbing his toe on hidden tree roots. Despite his stumbling progress the happiness he felt seemed a substance palpable as water or the sun's warmth, one which completely filled him and through which he blissfully moved. As they ascended the trail together Liam shaped the words to himself: This is the happiest I ever was in my whole life.

But even as he climbed brim-full of the strange joy, he noticed that Carrie was getting much too far ahead of him. *Wait,* he tried to call, but she vanished around a curve. Anxiety flowed into Liam, polluting the liquid joy. He tried to go faster up the hill but was quickly out of breath and tripping worse than ever. *Hurry up, Jeff, it's getting dangerous!* he cried, turning his head as he toiled to urge his friend to keep up; but now behind him the White Trail was empty.

Sobbing, filled with foreboding, he turned again and ran with great effort around the curve in the trail. To his immense relief he saw Carrie now, far ahead, red backpack bobbing as she strode. It seemed to be getting dark. *Wait!* he tried to call again. His voice came out in a husky croak, but she seemed to hear him at last, and stopped and turned at the very foot of the Ragged Rock. But as Liam labored closer, still fighting to catch his breath, the sense grew on him that something was still wrong. Carrie's short gray-brown hair had grown very gray and very long, straggling past her shoulders; her face was covered with gray hair; she had broadened and thickened; she was no taller than a ten-year-old, than himself. With sudden icy horror Liam realized that Carrie had turned into a Hefn, and with a shout of fear he woke.

He lay still till his heart had stopped racing. *God, what a nightmare. One for the books.* All that Hefn-talk this evening must have brought it on—Terry's anecdotes at dinner and his weird tale about the time window afterward. Maybe also what he had told Liam after that: that, one, his pal Humphrey, the Hefn in charge of the Bureau of Temporal Physics, was looking for mathematically gifted kids to intern in the Bureau, and wanted to interview him; and two, in 2020 Liam had been/would be working for the Bureau, according to what he'd told Terry back in 1990. Terry and Carrie had talked it over and decided it wasn't fair to Liam to keep Terry's preview of 2020 a secret from him any longer, since the information bore so directly on his future.

"When you saw me in the time window, did I know you?" Liam had asked, and Terry said, "You sure didn't let on that you did. But the Hefn say 'Time is One, and fixed,' meaning that everything that's ever going

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to happen, in some sense already has. So—if that's true—since I'm telling you about it now, I guess you must have known and were just pretending not to."

"In that case I don't see why you couldn't have told me before now," he had said a bit peevishly, and Terry had replied, "It was always possible to tell you. It wasn't possible to untell you. I wanted to be sure. But I consulted Humphrey about it yesterday—Humphrey knows the whole story, by the way—and *he* said that since Time is One, et cetera, and what will be will be, and indeed has been already, telling you couldn't possibly damage the fabric of the universe. So then it was up to Carrie and me, and we decided it would be a good idea for you to know how it all turns out. We think what Humphrey's offering you is a shot at something pretty terrific—being taken on as a trainee at the BTP ought to just about guarantee you a career, whatever you decide to do later, stay on or do something else. One way or the other it'll make a big difference to your future."

"You mean 'later' as in *after* 2020, because in 2020 I'm *going* to be working at the BTP?"

"So it seems."

"So was Humphrey the Hefn in the time window with me?"

Terry looked thoughtful. "Hmm. I hadn't thought about that. Maybe. Probably, even. Whoever it was, you told me he was your boss at the Bureau."

Liam had said, not very politely, "Well, it looks to me like you guys and Humphrey have got my future all sewed up between you."

He got up now and went to the bathroom in the dark. Then he climbed back into bed and lay on his back with his arms under his head and his eyes open, staring into blackness. The nightmare had shaken him up, brought home to him the tremendous contrast between the force of the feelings he used to feel all the time, like happiness and fear, and the emotional blankness of his present life.

What were his strongest feelings nowadays? Annoyance. Resentment. Irritation. Relief. Nothing that was any fun and nothing that was too upsetting. That shrink today, that Dr. Hightower who had told him to call her Julie, *she* was partly to blame for the nightmare, too. She had made him feel more bad feelings than he'd felt in ages by poking her innocent-sounding question at him, like some kind of pointed stick. *Are you happy?* Liam made a disgusted noise. He'd be damned if he was going back for any more of that. Feelings were mostly trouble, he didn't need a shrink trying to tell him different. If they were good ones, like at the beginning of the nightmare, it just set you up for a worse fall later on. Being happy wasn't worth shit if you couldn't count on staying happy, and you couldn't, that was one thing he knew for sure.

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Terry had said that working with the Hefn at the Bureau of Temporal Physics would make a big difference to his future. Until he and Carrie had brought the subject up, Liam hadn't thought at all, himself, about his future; but now that the question had been raised it was perfectly clear to him all at once, lying there in the dark, that he, Liam O'Hara, didn't want to have any future, thank you very much. No future at all, by God, despite the Hefn and their "Time is One" *garbazh* that implied he was as good as apprenticed to the Bureau of Temporal Physics already. No future at *all*—not even one that might have fascinated him once, working with the aliens in some sane, orderly, mathematical world and helping put things right on Earth.

What are you going to be when you grow up, little boy? he asked himself in somebody else's voice—was it Carrie's or Julie's?—and then answered himself: I'm not *going* to grow up. I'll be nothing. The word lifted him on a wave of pure relief, beyond despair. For some reason it felt like getting even with everybody for everything. *No future at all!*

Smiling, something he rarely did these days, Liam rolled over and closed his eyes again.

The next day after school Liam caught the Metro at the College Park Station a block from his house and rode into the city to see Terry in Georgetown. The arrangement had been that Terry was supposed to tell him in more detail, over dinner, about working with the Hefn—what would be expected of a trainee at the Bureau. Since he had already decided not to become a trainee, Liam could have cried off the dinner by phone. But the thought of an evening away from his mother's chronic worrying was agreeable, and the relief that had followed upon his middle-of-the-night decision was with him still. He killed some time at the Smithsonian, then hailed a taxi and rang the front doorbell of Terry's basement apartment at six o'clock sharp.

Terry opened the door, a pot holder in one hand and a big slotted spoon in the other, like a parody of the harried bachelor chef in a sitcom. He was wearing an apron. Cooking smells and ozone rock music poured through the door in one dense commingled wave. "Come on in," Terry shouted above the music, "*you're* right on the button, but you're going to have to watch the box or something for half an hour, because *I* got held up at the office."

"No problem," Liam shouted back, out of his new bland peacefulness. "I bought a *Sports Illustrated* on my way over."

"Perfect. Go and make yourself at home in the den. I'll bring you a Coke in a minute."

Liam took off his jacket and hung it up in the closet. He extracted the magazine from his bookbag and went into the cluttered, book-lined den that Terry had superimposed upon what had been a bedroom, automat-

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ically averting his eyes from the dozen or so pictures of Jeff—Jeff and himself at various ages, most of them—arranged in a shrine-like display in the hall. He settled down in Terry's beat-up old armchair, kicked off his shoes, put his feet in their socks on the hassock, and opened the magazine.

A few minutes went peacefully by. Suddenly Liam gasped, jerked upright, and dropped *Sports Illustrated* on the floor. In the living room, the tape of ozone rock had ended and now a single voice, clear and pure, soared like a skylark above an accompanying orchestra: *Alma Dei Creatoris, sedet rei peccatoris. . . .*

It was Jeff's solo from the spring concert, the last home-town performance the Philadelphia Boys' Choir had given before the meltdown delivered a fatal dose of radiation to every last chorister, as well as to the director and the driver, aboard the tour bus rolling between Baltimore and Lancaster.

Mater, mater clementissima! Liam knew the performance had been recorded but he'd never before heard the tape. Blindly he kicked the hassock out of his way and made for the door. Remembering then, he dived back for his shoes. As he sat on the floor shoving his feet into them, he heard Terry curse and the tape end with a squawk just as the full choir came in behind the solo.

Liam lurched to his feet, his shoes untied. He collided with Terry in the doorway to the den and fought to push past him, as he'd pushed past him on the dock at Lake Wallenpaupack two and a half years before; but this time Terry blocked his way, grabbing him round the chest while Liam flailed at him snarling "Let me go, let me go, I have to *go!*"

"Liam, God damn it, Liam! Stop this! Cut it out! Stop fighting me! I'm not *going* to let you go so you might as well stop." Terry, still in his apron, fringe of hair on end, finally got a grip on Liam's arms that effectively immobilized the boy. "Now listen to me—listen!" he panted. "I'm sorry as I can be that you heard that tape—I got home late and forgot to think about what was loaded in the stereo. It absolutely was not my intention to force you to face the fact of Jeff's death in that way. If I'd wanted to do that, I swear to you, I wouldn't have chosen that way of going about it."

Liam hadn't supposed Terry had played the tape on purpose. *Why* didn't matter. What mattered was that hearing it was unendurable, and hearing it unexpectedly today, after his dream of the night before, had shocked him terribly. Head down, he stood shaking with fury and breathing between gritted teeth in Terry's determined embrace.

Terry now loosened his grip on Liam a little, drew in a deep breath and said, more calmly, "I'll tell you the truth. I've been wondering whether somebody *shouldn't* force you to face it—not me, necessarily,

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but somebody, your mother or Carrie, or maybe this psychologist you're seeing now—but Liam, somebody's got to! You're hurting yourself so badly by not allowing yourself to grieve for Jeff. You can't get over a loss that terrible without feeling it, you poison yourself inside. God knows—God knows it hurts. Don't you think I know that? And there's a sense in which you and I, and Anne, and your mother, never will get over it; but Liam, Jeff's dead. He's dead. You're not. You've got a whole long life ahead of you, and it can be a very good life, but unless you can accept the fact that Jeff's dead and move beyond that, you might as well be dead yourself. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

While he spoke, Terry's restraining grip on Liam had turned into a loose hug, and then relaxed. Liam watched for his chance, and now he made his break, shoved Terry off balance and grabbed his coat from the closet on his dash through the hallway and out the door.

A couple of blocks away, when he saw that no one was chasing him, he stopped to put on his coat and tie his shoes. He decided to walk to the station. He had begun to recover from the first shock of hearing his dead friend's voice, and his head felt very clear.

You might as well be dead yourself was no more than the exact truth. Everything Terry had said made perfect sense to him; but since Liam knew he wasn't going to be able to stand facing the fact of Jeff's being dead, no matter who helped or forced him, not now and not ever, he would simply arrange not to have a whole long life ahead of him, or any life at all. Just as he had decided the night before. He would simply foreclose his future—not at some convenient vague moment in the coming weeks or months but now, immediately. He knew exactly how he wanted to go about it, as if he'd been planning this without realizing it for a long time, the way Terry had planned the evacuation of Philadelphia.

He had left his bookbag at Terry's place. That didn't actually matter; he wouldn't be going to school tomorrow anyway, or ever again. But his mother didn't know that, and it would make a perfect excuse for getting out of the house early in the morning. Terry would certainly have called his parents to report on what had happened. Liam would go home and stonewall—he knew how to keep them from pressuring him too hard for information, he knew without thinking about it that they were all a little afraid of him right now—and then he would go up to his room and start his preparations.

He sat on the Metro thinking through what he would have to do, his face more lively and interested in the planning of his own death than at any time since the death of his friend. Not once did he remember consciously that the next day, March 3, would have been Jeff's fifteenth birthday.

* * *

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Liam woke with a start as the train pulled into Baltimore. Disoriented, he hauled his backpack down from the overhead rack and hurried up the aisle to the exit, then doubled back to the baggage car to retrieve his solarcycle. Getting ready had taken a big part of the night, he had had to sneak around assembling the camping gear and provisions without waking anybody up. His room was right under Matt's and Carrie's bedroom. Even so, he could hardly believe he had fallen asleep.

The elements of Liam's departure had fallen into place as smoothly as if he actually *had* planned it with the same painstaking care as Terry had planned the evacuation. Last night, after stuffing everything in a big cellulose trash bag, he had waited for a freight train to go by on the Camden line tracks, opened his bedroom window under cover of the racket it made, and lowered the bag to the ground by the rope he had tied it shut with. It had then been a simple matter to climb down after the bag via the chestnut tree growing right outside the same window (he'd done that plenty of times by broad daylight), haul the bag to the station—closed at that hour—and stash it in the dumpster with the rope trailing over the side. That done, he had gone back for his bike, wheeling it in perfect silence out of its storage niche under the porch.

It was now after ten. He had left the house at seven, saying he had to get into the city and back before school to get his books from Terry's house. The solarcycle was waiting at the Metro station, exactly where he had triple-locked it. A few people saw him hauling the bag of gear out of the trash bin by the rope, but this was Washington and nobody looked twice.

Liam had clipped and strapped his equipment onto the bike and carried the whole rig down the stairs into the station, walking it onto the Metro as if he had no idea a permit to do this was required. But the station, like the train, was fully automated and no one stopped him. He'd gotten off at Union Station, bought a one-way ticket on the Camden Line—the one that went right past his house—to Baltimore from a machine, and taken the next train north. And here he was.

Baltimore was as far as he could get by train; the Camden Line trains terminated here, and after Baltimore the Amtrak trains would be sealed and pressurized like jet planes to cross the contaminated zone that included Wilmington, Philadelphia, and Trenton. They wouldn't stop again till Newark. Before Newark each train would pass through a special tunnel, where water would spray it from all sides to remove the radioactive dust. That was why he had brought the bike.

At the information booth he asked directions to the Army-Navy Store he remembered from being here a couple of years ago. He knew it was somewhere in the spruced-up area around Camden Station, and had

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gambled that it would still have something in stock that he had seen there before, and he was in luck.

"We've got a few left from the scare after Peach Bottom," said the man in the store, a middle-aged black man. "Everybody wanted their own radiation suit for a while there, then they all got used to it like. We haven't sold one of these since I can't remember when. Don't know if any of 'em are gonna be small enough to fit a little fella like you, but we'll sure see." As he spoke he was leading Liam through aisles crowded with piles of khaki pants and nylon raincoats and tents and sleeping bags, and down a flight of stairs, and there they were: three white radiation suits hanging up on hooks, with booties and gauntlets and visored helmets. "Think you can manage any of these?"

"It's not for me," said Liam, "but I can tell if it'll fit the person it's for by how it fits on me."

"Try this one," said the storekeeper kindly. "This one's probably meant to fit a woman but it don't make no difference really, they're all made the same."

The suit was still a mile too big for Liam, even over his down jacket, but it was the smallest one they had. "How much?" he asked, and gave the man his TEEN card and waited for him to check the account. This purchase was going to clean him out, just about, but so what? He had to have some protection or he wouldn't get anywhere close to the park; the radiation would get him before he even got across the river. He wanted to die in the right place.

One right place might be on Route 222, near the plant—the spot where Jeff's choir bus had encountered the radioactive plume. That was closer and easier, but that place had, as a place, no meaning at all for Liam. Better would be to try to get all the way back to the park, as he had already done in his nightmare. He might not make it all the way to the Ragged Rock, but the idea of dying while trying to get there suited his sense of fitness.

There was a calendar on the counter, one of those thick pads with each day's date on a separate page. As the storekeeper handed back his card and receipt and his bulky purchase crammed into a big paper bag, Liam's eye fell on the large red 3, and he realized, like a confirmation of his plan, that unwittingly he had chosen Jeff's birthday for beginning to end his own life.

He had included in his equipment a road map of the country he must try to cross, from before the disaster. Studying this last night, he'd decided the best idea would be to follow the route of U.S. 1, the old Baltimore Pike, which ran directly from this city to within a couple of miles of Ridley Creek State Park, and which crossed the Susquehanna, the major physical barrier of the trip, at Conowingo Dam by a bridge Liam was

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pretty sure was still standing, even though the dam's sluices had been opened and electricity was no longer generated there. He knew the road itself had been broken into rubble at the edge of the forbidden zone, to prevent cars from driving in, but the broken part wasn't supposed to be all that long.

He regretted now not listening more closely when Terry had talked about this, but probably it wouldn't matter. He was planning to bike up to where Route 1 ended, at its intersection with State Route 152, check out the situation, somehow figure out a way to get around the broken stretch with the loaded bike (preferably letting the bike's solar cells recharge while he did this figuring), pick up the road again beyond the point where it had been broken, and manage all of this without being detected from the ground or the air.

The worst immediate flaw in this scheme was the cloudy day. His batteries were on the low side now; he would not get very far under power unless the sun came out again or he stopped at a charging station first, before starting up Route 1. He could always pedal the bike himself, of course, but it didn't take much imagination to realize how difficult that would be once he'd put on the too-large protective rig.

He hated to take the time, but prudence won over impatience and he biked slowly along Calvert Street till he found a service station with a small sign saying SOLARCYCLES CHARGED. He was lucky; solarcycles hadn't caught on yet to the extent that very many stations were equipped to service them, though Terry thought they would be like solar cars, ubiquitous in a couple of years. It was like with clotheslines replacing electric dryers; usually you could just wait for a sunny day. But emergencies did arise, with bikes as with cars, and probably not that many people would have bought either if there hadn't been another way to charge them up besides the built-in photovoltaic cells.

Nobody was ahead of him. "I'm not sure how much credit I have left," he told the attendant, a bored-looking blonde woman, "but please find out and juice me up for all but fifty dollars worth of my balance." No problem about emptying out his account. Fifty dollars would buy him lunch and some more provisions for the road, and by tonight he would be where money could do him no good anyway. While he was waiting, he walked half a block up the street to a McDonald's and ordered a McMonstro and fries and a chocolate shake, and when he had eaten his way through all that he crossed the street to a supermarket and bought half a dozen sandwiches of assorted kinds, already made up, and a bag of apples and a three-liter carton of Swill.

Seventy-nine percent charged, one hundred percent broke, Liam mounted his overloaded bike and glided with the faintest possible whirr into the street. At the intersection of Broadway and Straight (which had

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been called Gay before the residents had renamed it during riots at the time of the AIDS Terror) he turned right. The street *was* straight, and wide, but hilly; Liam used the motor on the steep parts and switched it off to coast downhill. He passed a lot of brick row houses, each with a short flight of marble steps in front, and Johns Hopkins University, and a cluster of old hospital buildings and some small crummy shops. Rails ran along the street on both sides of a central island planted in rows of huge locust trees. A trolley passed him, going the other way, toward town.

Soon the houses got even more run-down and ratty-looking and only black people were on the streets. To his right Liam saw the castellated ramparts of Baltimore Cemetery, and shortly after that Route 1 swept in from the left to join Straight Street.

The street was poorly maintained and full of potholes and loose stones from temporary patches in the macadam. Two sets of trolley tracks were still set into the paving, but this far out there was no longer any service; the rails dated from when private cars had become less common in neighborhoods like this one, around the turn of the century.

Several miles of grubby commercial lots and buildings later, the traffic thinned down to nothing. After Peach Bottom, people had moved out of the northwest quadrant of Baltimore's suburbs and urburbs, and nobody much was driving up that way. Liam crossed 695, the old Beltway, and rode under several sets of derelict power lines that he guessed must run from the Peach Bottom plant. He went by some empty townhouses, wrecked and looted-looking, and then began to pass between small meadows of winter-pale dried grasses and weeds and small bare trees that, two years before, had been people's front lawns.

It was all pretty grim, and the gray day and penetrating wind did nothing to alleviate the grimness, but Liam found it all agreeably in keeping with his mood. A line from a poem came into his head, one Carrie must have planted there, probably a long time ago: something like *The world is dying, let him die.* He stopped to pull a wool cap over his aching ears, then rode on into the wasteland.

North of the ghost town of Perry Hall, Liam entered an area of expensive-looking houses that must have been abandoned while still quite new; you could tell the countryside round about had until recently been farmland. Here and there were patches of forest, the first he had encountered in twenty miles. He went by ghost service stations, modest single-family houses, a posh retirement village which had obviously been there only a very short while before Peach Bottom emptied it out.

And here he was. Less than two hours from the moment when Liam had thrown his McMonstro container and cup into the recycler in Baltimore, he had reached the end of the passable part of Route 1.

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He had wondered if the road would be guarded, or obstructed physically, or both. There were no guards, human, canine, or (as well as Liam could tell) electronic; but a high chain-link fence blocked the road and ran away out of view to either side, and a huge sign displayed the radiation symbol and warned DANGER KEEP OUT RADIATION HAZARD BEYOND THIS POINT in thick red letters a foot high. The metal fenceposts were bent out at the tops and strung with three strands of barbed wire, and on Liam's side of the fence a ditch deep enough to stop a tank had been gouged clear across the road.

Liam got off, holding the bike by the handlebars, and sighted through the mesh. For as far as he could see ahead, the surface of the road had been turned into chunks of concrete rubble.

The fence was a poser. How far did it actually run either way—and supposing he could get through, which way would it be easier to maneuver the loaded bike overland? Unless he could find a good-sized break in the fence *and* a way to move his bike over rough and/or wooded ground, he was going to have to abandon the solarcycle and strike off on foot, with something more than a hundred miles still to cover. He would never make it.

Liam glanced at his watch and snapped out of this brief reverie of indecision. School would be out soon, he would be expected home. He had to get himself and the bike under cover before he was missed, and to accomplish that he had to try to find a way past the fence.

The sign pointing left said Upper Crossroads 9, Madonna 17, Shane 30; the sign pointing right said Joppa 10. For no better reason than that Shane was the name of a movie he had liked, Liam wheeled the bike left, re-started it, and swung aboard.

The road went up and down through mostly open, hilly country bare of distinguishing features. On both sides were modest-looking houses set in rough meadows of abandoned lawn. The fence hugged the verge of the road to Liam's right and rose and fell with the landscape, a tight barrier between the road and the houses, impossible to burrow under without a jackhammer. At a few of the intersections more ditches had been gouged across the northbound tributary roads, some of which had also been broken to rubble.

Liam rode along, anxiously searching for a break in the fence. After a mile or so he shut down the power to conserve it and began to pedal; but he was getting tired and there were a lot of hills. Most of the houses he could see through the wire meshes looked pretty old, and some were burned-out hulls, but the fence was almost new and in excellent repair. Liam searched for weak places or gaps as he rode with all the intense personal interest of a fence-riding cowboy, but there were none.

Cars passed him occasionally, and motorbikes. Somebody might re-

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member seeing a boy by himself on a solarcycle at the edge of the forbidden zone. It made him anxious, but there was nothing he could do about that. At a turn-off called Pocock Road he checked his odometer. He had come eight miles from Route 1, and the fence flowed smoothly on ahead; there was nothing to do but go back and try the other way.

But the other way was no different: same houses, same rolling hills, same tight chain-link barrier snugged to the very edge of the road. Liam biked all the way to where Route 152 crossed on a bridge over Interstate 95, five miles west of Route 1, before admitting to himself that the fence was not going to let him over or under or through.

He turned back toward Baltimore Pike because he didn't know what else to do. At a place where a wooded gully with a little stream at the bottom separated two houses on the north side of the road, he stopped. He leaned the bike against the fence and got out his packet of sandwiches; then he braced his own back against the fence and sat down on the hard black surface, eating chicken salad on rye and drinking from time to time out of the carton of Swill, too bushed to think what to do next. The wind blew harder; he would be chilled soon, even in his down jacket. Through his pants the surface of the road was cold. He stuck the hand not holding the sandwich into his pocket. When he had finished eating he continued to sit, mind blank of everything but discouragement and fatigue.

Half an hour may have passed before the racket of the little stream in the gully below caught Liam's attention; but when it did he twisted around and got up on his knees to peer down at the water clattering over stones about thirty feet below. He was not on a bridge, the creek and its little valley were too small to require one, but all at once, into the weary vacancy in his mind, intruded a thought: Where was the water coming from? It emerged directly below the spot where he was kneeling; there was no sign of a stream bed to right or left. Where else, then, but from the other side of the road?

Liam waited for a car to go by, then darted across the road and down a steep slope into what had once been somebody's big back yard. He could see the flash of flowing water in the long flattened dead grass below, and the lines of paved drains slicing through—and there, Eureka! Under a heavy brow of earth covered thickly with dry weeds and shrubs and little trees, was a round concrete culvert. The concrete was several inches thick and full of gritstone; it must have been laid there decades ago, culverts nowadays were made of recycled PVC pipe or fired clay. Heart thumping with the charge of adrenaline, Liam skidded down to the very rim of the culvert, directly above where the water disappeared. Even before he reached it he could tell the concrete tunnel was at least thirty-

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six inches in diameter. Big enough to let him through. Big enough to admit the bike, if he stripped it down and took off the wheels.

Liam slid down on the seat of his pants to the bottom of the slope and sighted through the culvert, holding his breath lest the way be blocked by more of the fencing, or by some obstacle he wouldn't be able to move. He could see the round eye of light in the distance, but from where he crouched it was impossible to tell whether the far end was blocked by metal mesh. He debated going back for a flashlight, looked at his watch instead, and plunged into the echoing darkness.

He tried at first to straddle the water, keep his feet dry, but the tunnel was too cramped and heavy rains had carried brush and silt partway through. Before long not only his shoes but his pants and even the sleeves of his jacket were soaked. For once in his life Liam felt grateful to be small; a larger boy would have had to crawl the whole way on his knees. He managed a kind of crouching walk for most of the distance, but his back and legs ached by the time he pushed out the other end and saw that he was indeed behind the fence. He could see the solarcycle on the other side, silhouetted high above his head.

It was the hardest work Liam had ever done in his life, but by six o'clock that evening he stood in deep twilight at the edge of the woods he had picnicked beside, having moved his bike and all his camping equipment through the tunnel, carried them piecemeal staggering up the side of the ravine, and put the whole rig back together. To accomplish all this he had made five arduous trips back and forth through the culvert and four up the steep, slippery side of the gully. He was soaked and filthy and more exhausted than he could ever remember being before, and he ached everywhere.

At the same time he was aware of another feeling, one as unfamiliar as this extreme of physical exhaustion. It was glee. He had tackled a really difficult problem and solved it, as successfully as he might have solved a problem in chess or calculus, and the resulting glee had something to do with the effort having required not only his mental but his muscular "personal best." The success had brought him that much nearer to his death, but that didn't seem to matter. Tired as he was, he felt whole.

But he could do no more that day. The air was freezing, and while Liam stood reconnoitering a few flakes of snow drifted out of the rapidly darkening sky. Liam left the bike where it was, concealed among the trees from anybody driving past on the road. He hauled on his backpack one last time, shouldered his saddle bags, gripped his sleeping bag in his arms, and made his way clumsily across the overgrown yard to the back door of the house.

He was prepared to break in, but the door was unlocked; Liam simply

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turned the knob and went in. He felt his way through to a carpeted room and dumped his burden. It was as dark and cold inside the house as out, a dead stale penetrating cold, but Liam was grateful enough just to be out of the wind and snow. Quick as he could he unrolled his sleeping bag on the relative softness of the carpeting. He identified the sweatsuit in his pack by feel, shucked his wet clothes, pulled on the sweat pants and sweatshirt (which was hard to do because he was shaking so badly) and some thick dry socks, and crawled into the sleeping bag. Before his fingers had found and closed the zipper he was asleep.

Liam woke to the sound of a helicopter beating back and forth above the house. The sound of it faded and grew, and he realized he had been aware of it for some time before coming completely awake. His watch, to his astonishment, said 9:52; he had slept fifteen hours! He sat up, hurting everywhere and absolutely famished.

It was still very cold in the room, but bright. As expected, it was a living room. Liam extracted himself from his sleeping bag and limpingly padded to the picture window in his boot socks. The clouds had cleared off during the night and there was no snow at all on the ground. Only now did it occur to Liam that if the few flakes that had fallen on him the evening before had developed into the kind of heavy spring snowstorm that often struck this part of the country in March, his trip would have been over.

What he had to do now was: get dressed, get out to the bike, put it in full sun, and open the solar panels. While the battery charged he could be scouting a route to the nearest road that might put him back on Route 1 above the broken section. He also had to pee and eat, but the second of these could wait till he'd taken care of the bike.

Getting dressed, however, turned out not to be so easy. The clothes he had worn the day before, including his down jacket, were still soaking wet. He had a spare pair of pants and two sweaters besides the sweatsuit he had slept in—an experienced camper always takes extra clothes—but sometime while Liam had been struggling back and forth through the culvert, his light cycling shoes—not designed for such rough treatment, or for that much wetting—had split along the seams. The only other shoes he had brought were hiking boots, on the assumption that if the bike broke down or ran out of juice, or the roads were impassable on wheels, he might have to walk a long way. In their present state the cycling shoes were useless for walking, and the boots were clumsy for cycling, yet it seemed likely that at least today he would have to do a fair amount of on-and-offing, riding where he could, walking where he couldn't or where he needed to scout the terrain.

The parka was a much worse problem. The insulating value of wet down, as Liam well knew, is zero. At home he would have tossed the coat

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in the dryer, which would have dried and fluffed it nicely in an hour or so, but even if this house had a dryer, and even if by some chance it happened to be a solar one, and not dependent on non-existent power from Conowingo or Peach Bottom, he doubted that after two and a half years of neglect the panels would still be working. Most likely there would be no dryer at all.

This proved to be correct. Here at the very edge of the danger zone, people had been given time to move out in an orderly way, taking all their house contents with them. The living room where Liam had spent the night was furnished with a green carpet, a fireplace with empty built-in bookcases on both sides, and open drapes at the picture window, and nothing else. The only sign that this had been anything other than an ordinary move was the amount of trash lying about. Liam found a laundry room off the kitchen, but all that was left of the appliances were some wires and cables sticking out of the wall.

He should have taken off the coat and carried it through the culvert dry, as he had carried the sleeping bag, also down; but there was no point in thinking about that now. Liam shrugged, put both sweaters on over the sweatshirt, changed the sweatpants for dry corduroys, laced up his boots, and went out the same door he had come in by, which led off the kitchen.

It was *cold,* colder than yesterday; the wind cut straight through his layered wool sweaters. Liam stayed out only long enough to pee, then went back inside and rummaged in his saddlebags for gloves and the woolen watch cap he had worn the day before. Out in the wind again, he had to hunt for the bike he had hidden in the dark, and then force his stiff muscles to haul it up the last part of the hill and run with it across the back yard to the house, after listening to be sure no cars were coming.

He had positioned the bike in a sunny spot where it couldn't possibly be seen from the road, and had just opened the solar panels, which folded out like stumpy wings from the crossbar, when he heard the helicopter again and realized with a jolt of alarm that it might well be looking for him.

Heart in his throat, Liam clipped the wings down flat again and hurried the bike up the back steps and into the house. The racket grew deafening. Could they have electronic sensors aboard the thing? Did they already know he was here? Despite the dead chill of the house Liam broke into a sweat; but instead of landing the chopper flew over and past, and the noise began to lessen.

When it was gone altogether and Liam's heart had slowed down, he was seized with a sense of urgency. He had to get going, he had to figure out how to proceed. His head pounded with anxiety—also, he realized,

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with hunger. He was absolutely ravenous. Sitting down cross-legged on the carpeting, in the patch of sunlight under the window, he gobbled three sandwiches and three apples without stopping, and drank at least a pint of Swill, as well as he could judge by peering critically into the carton's spout with one eye. Briefly he regretted not having bought two cartons while he'd had the chance; but there was a full canteen of water in one of the saddlebags for when the Swill was gone.

Sunlight was streaming over him through the picture window, which faced south, toward the creek and the ravine. The drapes had been left open, and the carpet beneath the window was faded. Some dead plants in pots on the sill cast their shadows on the faded spot. Staring at these while cramming bread and cheese into his mouth, Liam suddenly had an idea, his second really bright idea in as many days. He obviously couldn't risk charging the battery outside. With the panels' light cells flashing and twinkling in the sun, the bike would be plain as a pikestaff from the air no matter where he put it. But he *could* leave it in the deep pool of sunshine under the window, inside the house! The tomato and broccoli seedlings his mother set on the windowsill at home every spring grew leggy, but they grew. The battery wouldn't charge as well as it would in full sun outdoors, but it was something.

Liam got up from the floor and brought the bike over to the window. He fussed with it till he was satisfied that the solar wings would have the maximum exposure to the sun for the longest time; then, encouraged by having found a creative solution to yet another problem, he started opening closet doors. Maybe the people who lived here had left behind some old clothes that weren't worth taking along. The coat closet in the entry hall was empty, but Liam worked his way through the bedrooms and was finally rewarded with a moth-chewed lumberjack shirt in a red and black plaid, with an L. L. Bean label inside the collar, and an ancient trenchcoat. Both these garments were much too big for him, but he was not in a position to be choosy; he hacked the tail off the trench coat (which would otherwise have tended to tangle in his spokes) and put both of them on. His wet clothes, including the useless down jacket, he let lie in soggy heaps, just as they were. He took his compass out of an outside saddlebag pocket, and he was ready.

The helicopter had not returned. Liam let himself out the back door again, walked perpendicular to Route 152 until he was among trees, then struck directly westward on a compass bearing, heading away from the gully. His map showed that the only road connecting 152 and the one farther north leading into Bel Air, where he was sure to be able to get back onto Route 1, was not far away to the east at all; but he had noticed the day before that that was one of the broken-up roads with a ditch. So heading east would be pointless.

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He had only gone a couple of hundred yards through the woods when he broke out into back yards again, and houses, and walked down a driveway onto a road running northeast and southwest, meaning it ran parallel to Route 1. To Liam's joy, this road's surface was intact. Maybe that meant it didn't lead anywhere much, or maybe they hadn't bothered to wreck the distinctly secondary, indirect routes to someplace. This one wasn't on his road map; but, whatever that meant, he would follow it for a while to see if it would take him where he needed to go. If it would, if his luck held, it would not be too hard to carry the bike and his gear this far, and *then* he could load up again and ride.

Soon the road alarmed him by jogging southeast in a wide curve, but then it straightened out again and went in the right direction for nearly a mile, between abandoned houses like the one where he had spent the night. Liam passed several side roads, most of them with signs saying NO OUTLET. When the road he was following forked, he stayed with the northernmost fork, which continued to bear the same name as before, Reckord Road. He began to feel quite hopeful; but just as he was starting to think of turning back and taking his chances with the bike he saw something like a roadblock up ahead.

When he got closer his spirits suffered a terrible blow. Improbable as it seemed, the obstacle ahead was *another* chain-link fence turned out at the top and strung with three strands of barbed wire, and it ran right across the road and as far as he could see in both directions. For a wild few minutes as he approached this new obstacle Liam wondered if he could somehow have gotten turned around, despite the compass, and come back to the original fence again. Anxiously he hurried forward.

There was a double gate in this fence the same width as the road. On the gate was a large sign. Liam broke into a clumsy run until he got close enough to be able to see that the sign read: ATKISSON RESERVOIR (ARMY CHEMICAL CENTER): NO ADMITTANCE. The gate was chained shut and locked with three enormous padlocks. On the other side the road ran straight on.

Liam stood in his ragbag clothes and admitted to himself that, even in the unlikely event that he could find a similar way of getting under, he would not be able to cope with one of these fences a second time. His strength and resolve had already been expended to their limits in that direction. He would have to go back and take the one side road on the north side of Reckord Road that hadn't been signposted NO OUTLET.

Wearily he turned around and trudged back the way he had come. At the turning he hesitated, but there was no point in scouting the only route available. If this road led nowhere, then nowhere was where Liam would be going, at least on wheels and under power.

On the way back, the wind blew into his face. The sky was now full

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of large fluffy cumuli that kept covering the sun. Liam pulled the sawed-off trench coat tighter around himself and bent forward into the wind; at least it would be a tail wind, once he was mounted, which would help conserve power.

And then above the wind he heard again the clatter of an approaching helicopter.

Liam sprinted across the front yard of a derelict house and squeezed into the space between its brick wall and a hugely overgrown rhododendron. Twigs poked into his eyes and raked off his cap. The helicopter passed so close above him that the whacking of the rotors filled the world, and he could plainly see the two figures inside.

When the outrageous noise had dwindled, Liam plucked his cap out of the shrub, pulled it back on his head, and set off again at the fastest pace he could manage in the heavy boots. Soon, despite the cold wind, he was sweating with effort and anxiety. Almost back to the house, a fresh anxiety struck him: which yard had he come through to reach Reckord Road? He failed absolutely to recognize the place, and wasted time in trial and error; but in fact there were only half a dozen houses whose driveways he could have come down, and finally he found the right one.

Back inside "his" house the sun had moved and the bike stood in partial shade. But the charge on the battery was up eleven percent, and Liam's spirits lifted for the first time since he had seen the gate blocking Reckord Road. Quickly, now, he prepared to abandon his refuge. He decided to leave behind all his wet clothes except the down jacket, which he might have a chance to dry (and whose warmth he would miss badly tonight if he couldn't). Standing, he ate another sandwich—the last of those he had bought—and drained the carton of Swill.

It went against Liam's grain to leave stuff lying around messily, like the astronauts leaving waste and trash on the moon; at the last minute he put all his wrappers and the crushed Swill carton into the sandwich bag and left the bag by the kitchen door. He also squandered a couple of minutes hanging his pants on a hook, his socks on doorknobs, and the shirt on the hangar he'd found the lumberjack shirt on, but it made him feel better. He carried all the rest of his things outside and closed the door securely.

First, the bike. The wheels came off again with two quick twists; then, with an ear tuned to the possible return of the helicopter, Liam shouldered the frame, light but awkward, and carried it through the trees and yards and down the driveway to Reckord Road. He stashed it there on the porch of a house and went back for the rest of his gear. Another half hour, and the bike had been reassembled and loaded, and Liam was cruising along looking out for his left turn.

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Again, luck was with him. After an anxious hour of backing and filling among the unexplored roads he hit the Army Chemical Center fence again and almost despaired. But this time he could see houses to his left through the bare trees, and a short scouting expedition on foot showed that the fence angled abruptly north only a few hundred yards beyond the road. He circled around through the woods, between the fence and the houses built on the ridge above it, and struck the same road he had just left, now exiting the Chemical Center from the opposite side by way of another gate. By pressing himself against the gate on this far side, and staring very hard back along this road, he could see all the way across the long, narrow space enclosed by the fence, back to where the other gate had stopped him. He and his bike were almost at one tip of this space; he would simply strip the bike again, carry everything around, reassemble and reload, and be back in business.

He heard the helicopter again shortly after he had accomplished these labors and was back in the saddle, riding briefly under power as a reward. This time, to Liam's great relief, the chopper never came in view. He was getting very tired. It would have taken all his strength to leap off the bike and run it off the road into the trees, or behind some house; in fact, it would have taken all his strength to do anything that had to be done quickly. He had used up a week's adrenaline humping the bike and everything else around the fence through the woods. Lucky for me, he thought, that it's still so early in the year. The new growing season's berry canes would have ripped his clothes and skin to pieces; the brittle old ones could be trampled down.

After that, things went more smoothly. The first time a left turn led back to Route 1, he followed it only to find the highway still in chunks. But the next left was State Route 24, which ran straight into Bel Air and intersected with Route 1; and this far into the danger zone the authorities had suspended their efforts to prevent people from exposing themselves to radiation. The road was whole. Liam had made it through.

It was late and he was tired and chilled clear to the marrowbone. Best to hole up here in town for the night. Tomorrow he would have to start wearing the radiation suit; from now on he would risk exposure to radiation every time he ate or drank anything or relieved himself, but — always assuming the bridge over the dam at Conowingo to be passable—he thought the chief logistical difficulties were behind him now and it would mostly be a question of not getting too sick till he'd covered the rest of the distance to the Ragged Rock. If he started queasing out this side of the Susquehanna, there was still the option of heading up 222, as Jeff's bus had done. But, having got this far, he felt pretty confident of making it all the way.

Liam steered the solarcycle through a few back streets, chose a house

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at random, and tried the door. That one was locked, but he went along the street trying doors until the latch of one clicked under his hand. People had been evacuated more unceremoniously from Bel Air. The house he entered was as cold as last night's house had been, but still had furniture and smelled powerfully of mildew—or perhaps Liam wasn't quite as tired as he'd been last night, and noticed the smelliness more. The front door was at ground level; he walked the bike inside with all his gear still loaded.

There was a windowless room off the kitchen, a kind of pantry-cum-storage-room-cum-spare-bedroom, with a cot and a thin mattress, and a lot of boxes and things stacked against the walls. Thinking an inner room might be less contaminated with radioactive dust, Liam decided to camp there for the night. He brought the bike in. Sitting on the cot, in almost total darkness, he unpacked and opened a can of beans, then another can, then chomped his way through several apples. Finally he unscrewed the cap of his canteen and took a long drink of the stale tap water inside, brought all the way from home.

The tap at which he had filled that canteen felt a million miles away, though in real miles Liam hadn't actually come all that far. Almost for the first time since leaving home he thought of his parents, and Carrie and Matt, and Terry, and what they must all be feeling and saying about him. For the very first time he thought of the note he had left: "This is something I have to do. Try not to feel too bad." Not enough to give his plan away in time for them to stop him, but enough to tell them what he wanted them to know, after they found out what he'd done.

The bare mattress was smelly but seemed free of mouse nests as far as he could tell. Probably radiation had killed all the mice. Thoughtfully, feeling oddly old, Liam unstrapped the sleeping bag from his bike and rolled it out on top of the cot. He stripped down to his sweatshirt and put on the sweat pants again. His down jacket, not much dryer after a day spent strapped across his saddlebags, was beginning to reek; he tossed it onto the kitchen floor, deciding with a shrug to leave it behind tomorrow. Another forty-eight hours or so, and things like being cold and hungry and tired, and worse things, weren't going to matter any more.

Liam woke the next morning from a complicated dream about Jeff which dissolved the instant he opened his eyes. He lay still, trying to make it come back, but all he could get were a sense of confusion and distress, and Jeff's voice saying "Didn't you even *try* to—" something or other. Try to what? He wanted desperately to know; but nothing would come and after a while he gave it up and wriggled out of the bag. Today he would cross the Susquehanna.

By eleven o'clock Liam, wearing his brand-new too-big radiation coverall, including gauntlets and booties and visored helmet, and the res-

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pirator with a mouthpiece like the sort you wore skindiving, was riding his recharged solarcycle along Route 1, north of Bel Air. He rode slowly, partly to conserve power, partly because shortly after leaving the town the road had entered a wooded area for the first time since leaving Baltimore, and dead branches littered the road. A branch could snag his spokes and dump both him and the bike onto the hardtop if he wasn't careful. From inside the helmet, unfortunately, it was a little hard to see.

He had been lucky again; the morning had begun brightly, and his battery had been able to breakfast on sunlight while he spent an hour and a half figuring out how to put the suit on. Without the puffy down jacket to pad it out the thing was huger than ever on him and the lead lining made it drag awkwardly. *Pedaling* the bike would obviously be impossible; he would have to nurse it along as far as he could and then walk until he dropped. Maybe Route 222 would be the better choice after all—but he would wait till he got to Conowingo and see.

Now that there were no more problems to be solved or decisions to be made for a while—now that he could simply balance his body in its baggy leaded longjohns on the solarcycle, steer around tree limbs, and endure the suit's discomfort—Liam found himself doing something he had assiduously and consistently avoided doing for a very long time: he found himself thinking about Jeff. Thinking about him directly, not flinching or freezing at the first whiff of Jeff-thought but letting the memories come, letting the flavor of this morning's lost dream, and the whole pushed-under *sense* of his friend, fill up his mind. Jeff would have loved this trip, he knew. Jeff's being along would have made an exciting adventure of it, instead of the dreary, uncomfortable struggle it had mostly been. Somehow it felt right—safe—to remember Jeff now, to invoke his personality and presence, knowing that in a few more days these things as he had known them would be gone forever from the world.

It did seem safe at first. Vivid pictures came to him: Jeff next to him in meditation class, sitting straight with his eyes closed and his right hand palm upward on his left, still as a statue while Liam chafed and squirmed and sneaked looks at the clock; Jeff in his wine-colored Philadelphia Boys' Choir blazer and black tie, his thick hair neatly parted and combed, stepping to the front of the bright stage to begin his solo; Jeff at the cabin, racing him up Mount Pocono, racing to see who could pick the most blueberries, optimistically racing (in the tent together that last summer, at twelve and almost-twelve) to see who would finally be the first to actually come; Jeff in a fury in his own back yard in Haverford, saying "Why won't she leave me the hell *alone* about it? What's she got against you, anyway?" Saying, "I don't care what she says or what she

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does, I'm going to be with you as much as I want. Dad'll make her let me."

But these memories had been dammed up for more than two years—and, unlike at Conowingo, the sluices had stayed clamped shut. To open them now was to risk carrying the dam itself away in a flood of backed-up feeling. Liam had just started to feel a little funny when he was struck, as by an enormous fist, with more anguish than he had known a human body could contain. He cried out. Behind the helmet's visor his face went out of control, stretching and flexing as if it too were a fist, and from his eyes, tightly clenched though they were, came a literal outburst of tears.

With some part of his mind still able to observe and think he tried to make himself turn the bike off and stop, but—unable to breathe or see—instead felt the front tire hit something, the handlebars jerk sideways in his hands, and himself be hurled to the ground; but he could scarcely tell whether he had fallen off the solarcycle or whether the appalling pain of remembering Jeff had left him sprawled in the road like this, crying so hard he was just about screaming, unable to use the respirator right, unable to stop, unable to stand it. It was in order not to have to stand feeling these things that he had decided to die, and gone to all this trouble, and here he was feeling them anyway! It wasn't fair. He felt as if he were dying *now*.

In all of Liam's first twelve years, there never was a time when his life and Jeff Carpenter's hadn't been tangled up together, when Jeff hadn't in fact been the most important person *in* his life—more important than his parents or his sisters or Carrie or Jeff's father, the one most necessary individual he knew. The one Liam had most needed not to die, and the one who, for some reason he didn't understand, he could not face the rest of his life without.

When he finally sat up, a long time later, it was because he had heard the helicopter. The suit impaired his directional hearing, but wherever the whack-whack-whack of the chopper was coming from, it didn't sound too close. This was just as well; Liam was in no shape to take evasive action.

His visor was so steamed up he couldn't see out at all, and his face felt completely covered with guck. He couldn't blow his nose or de-fog the faceplate without risk; this close to Peach Bottom everything was bound to be pretty hot, and if he was going to make it all the way to the Ragged Rock he should open the suit only when he absolutely had to.

But he couldn't see a thing, and there was finally nothing to do but loosen the fastenings, remove one gauntlet, and reach his bare hand up inside the helmet to wipe the visor and his own face with a sleeve of the sweatshirt from his saddlebag. As soon as he fastened the helmet again the visor steamed up some, but not quite so badly; at least he could just

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about see to pick the bike up, check it over for damages, secure the saddlebags and sleeping bag. All the time he was doing this the chopper faded in and out of range, but it never came close and after a while Liam realized he wasn't hearing it anymore.

The bike seemed undamaged—a very good thing, because repairing anything broken would have been impossible. As soon as he could Liam remounted and set off again, badly shaken, his brain throbbing and swollen-feeling. The experience of being slapped to the ground by grief had changed his thinking and stiffened his resolve. He had made a mistake. Less than ever, now, could he afford to think about Jeff.

But now thoughts and images of Jeff, released from their long bondage, invaded and plagued him and refused to be bound again. It was awful. Not even when they got the news that Jeff had died in the hospital had Liam felt so bad. After a while he began to wonder if the degree of his wretchedness might mean that the radiation sickness had already begun, and felt a thrill of fear that surprised him: how should he fear the thing he had come so far and endured so much to find? Confused and miserable, he rode on through the windy, cloud-fraught afternoon.

At last, after an endless time of steep hills and swooping valleys, and one more ghost town, called Hickory, where he saw the big pale bones of cattle half-hidden among the tall dead weeds of a pasture, Liam came in sight of a sign saying Conowingo 4. If the dam and bridge were still there, if he got across the river, he would now certainly achieve the lesser of his goals at a minimum; and if it were not he could stop now on this side and remove the protective clothing, knowing he had come as close as he could. The last major logistical question about the trip was about to be settled, and when it was, then he wouldn't have to think anymore at all.

The bridge *was* there, and looked solid; Liam swooped around a wide curve and there it was below him, a long straight line ruled across the broad river. Before the meltdown at the Peach Bottom Nuclear Facility—which was now very near, only a few miles away—the dam had held the water on the upstream side of the bridge at a much higher level than the water on the downstream side, which used to be quite shallow and full of rocks. Now the river was about equally deep on both sides, and the bridge merely a terrifically massive bridge, not a functional dam that cars could cross on top of.

How much longer it would be there probably depended on how important the people in charge thought it was to have a bridge at Conowingo. The one at Interstate 95, near the mouth of the Susquehanna, the bridge Jeff's bus had crossed to get here, was regularly maintained, as was the Amtrak bridge, but this one was closer to the plant and probably very hot. The river water itself was not especially radioactive now, because

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the intakes at Peach Bottom had been sealed off with concrete when the plant itself had been contained. They had had to do that, otherwise the whole Chesapeake Bay area, including Baltimore, would have been as uninhabitable as Philadelphia. Liam had heard Terry bring all these matters up from time to time, but had paid little attention, not imagining then that he would ever have occasion to take a personal interest in any of them.

Well, after tomorrow, he wouldn't. Anyway, all he really needed to know he now did know: the bridge still spanned the river.

He coasted down the curve of the hill and approached the dam. The Susquehanna, very wide, gleamed pale blue under the blue sky in that washed-out late-winter landscape. Liam switched on the power, which was getting pretty low again, and started across the bridge. Once well and truly across, he would stop for a while to let the battery charge up between drifts of cloud.

At first there was a rusty metal wall to his right, part of the housing for the machinery that used to operate the dam, and he couldn't see downstream. Then the wall ended and he had a full view in both directions. The wind blowing at the bridge's midpoint had teeth in it, and the helmet restricted his vision, but his spirits soared unexpectedly at the prospect from the middle of the river—followed instantly by the sort of thought that had been tormenting him all afternoon, like a carving knife twisting in his stomach: *Wow, I sure wish Jeff could see this!* He sobbed once and struggled fiercely against tears, teeth clamped on the respirator mouthpiece, knowing his visor would steam up again if he gave way.

The bridge ended in an uphill curve of road. To the right, an extension of railroad bridge struck off at an angle to the road; and smack in the middle of the span, dressed in a radiation suit very much like Liam's, sat a small stumpy figure.

Liam was so astonished that instead of gunning his bike and fleeing up the hill he stopped dead. The little figure hopped down and came toward him, and then Liam did gear down and start to ride away, but he was too slow. Before he had collected his wits the dwarf, straddling the front wheel, had seized the solarcycle's handlebars with both gloved hands, and Liam discovered that small or not it was a much stronger being than himself. He yanked and wrenched, but the bike wouldn't budge.

At close range it was also obvious that the dwarf's suit was of a much higher quality than his own, probably custom-made, definitely not scrounged on the cheap from an Army-Navy store. The suit had a built-in microphone, into which its wearer now spoke. "I'm not here to try and stop you," was the first thing it said. "I've a pretty fair idea of what you're up to, and as a matter of fact I think you have a perfect right to

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carry out your plan, though your family wouldn't thank me for saying so. Nor would Terry, and he's the main reason I've been tracking you. He's a good friend of mine. My name is Humphrey."

Still dumbfounded, Liam's mind worked sluggishly to take this in. Humphrey? Terry's pal Humphrey the Hefn, from the Bureau of Temporal Physics—the one that had offered to interview him for an internship at the Bureau? Finally he did manage to mumble, "Tracking me?"

"Most of the way from Baltimore. You're quite an enterprising fellow, Liam O'Hara. We would very much like to have you on our staff at the BTP."

Light dawned, or rather struck. "That was *you* in that helicopter! Shit! You had heat sensors, didn't you? You knew where I was the whole time," he said bitterly. "How come you let me get so far?"

"I've already told you," Humphrey replied calmly, "and you can believe me, that I have no intention of preventing you from following your plan. I'll even help you carry it out, if that's what you want—the chopper is at your service—though I'll understand perfectly if you prefer to complete the trip under your own steam. I doubt you'd make it all the way, quite frankly, but I suppose honor would be served in any case. It's entirely up to you. By the way, were you making for your friend's house in Haverford, or for the park in Delaware County?"

This was too much. "How did you *know*?" Liam cried, really furious.

"I—deduced it from the available information," said Humphrey placidly, "or rather I should say that Terry did. Consider the facts. Your friend's death had depressed you deeply. You drifted, you withdrew. More than two years went by. Finally you left a note and disappeared. You took your bike. A boy matching your description bought a radiation suit in Baltimore. A boy on a solarcycle, boy and bike both matching the police descriptions, was seen by several people riding along the edge of the contaminated area. Terry could think of only one or two reasons why you might have done those things, and all of them boded ill."

"Oh." Liam's fury drained away. He *had* left a trail a yard wide. "Well, I still don't see what it's got to do with you."

"I offered to undertake the search as a favor to my friend Terry, who is nearly frantic, by the way. He keeps saying, 'I can't lose them both, I just can't.' (Liam winced.) You're aware that he saw you in the time transceiver, all grown up and evidently in excellent health? Yes? *I'd* have said that ought to give him confidence, but this development is testing his faith."

"What's that supposed to mean? Confidence in wha

"In your survival and safe return."

Who the hell did this little guy think he was? "Are you trying to tell

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me that because Terry saw me in the time window, there's no way I can *possibly* die until after 2020?"

"According to our understanding of time, if he saw you, then you're definitely still going to be alive seven years from now, yes. Nevertheless, my offer stands."

Liam said, outraged, "Yeah, well, what if I just take off this radiation suit *right this minute?*"

Humphrey pirouetted suddenly and let go of the bike; Liam staggered, thrown off balance. Humphrey dropped to all fours. "Then you won't be alive seven *days* from now. But you're not seriously thinking of doing that?" He stood upright again and came forward until he could lay one hand on the bike again. "What we never know beforehand, you see, is *how*. By what means will you be alive in the year twenty-twenty, so that Terry can have seen you in the transceiver? I myself feel certain of the outcome; but it's perfectly possible that your survival could be achieved somehow by my flying you to Philadelphia in the helicopter, or even by stepping aside and letting you proceed on your own. Either of those ways might be *how*. We won't know the answer till events have *revealed* it. We never do."

Liam stared, then shook his head, confused. "I thought it was the police looking for me," he mumbled.

"The police have been told to keep out of this," Humphrey informed him casually, and Liam felt stunned at this evidence, so seldom pushed down people's throats, of how completely the Hefn were in charge here now—so completely that they could tell governments and police forces to butt out when they liked. In the face of such authority and power, what should he do? He was just a kid. Was it really true that his tremendous effort had been doomed to failure from the start? Was he sorry or glad? He didn't know; he couldn't tell what he felt about any of it, except that he still didn't know how to go on living without Jeff, any better than before.

"Let me be entirely honest with you," remarked Humphrey in his tinny microphone-processed voice. "I also offered to help Terry because I was curious. Why would a boy with his whole life ahead of him want to die, only because his friend had died? Other youngsters lose friends or parents or other people important to them, and they're naturally distressed, but after a while they . . . adjust. You haven't even begun to get over this loss of yours. It's unusual. The relationship was unusual. I'm interested in humans and in human connections, and this connection of yours with Jeff is something I wish to understand better."

"It's none of your business," said Liam shakily. "It's nobody's business now but mine."

"I agree in a sense," said Humphrey, "and, as I promised, I'll do pre-

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cisely as you instruct me. Leave you here if you like. Fly you the rest of the way. But I do have a third suggestion, and it isn't simply to take you home."

Liam's mind felt muddled. Things were taking a peculiar turn. Evidently he really would not be rescued against his will; his wishes, even his self-destructive wishes, were to be respected by this alien, as they could not possibly be respected by his family or by Terry.

If he chose to go on, what would Humphrey do? Tell his parents and Terry that the search had been unsuccessful? Wait till he died, then bring his body back to be buried in a lead-lined coffin? One thing was sure, he certainly wouldn't tell them he had allowed Liam to refuse to be brought home.

But the Hefn had said he wasn't going to die.

But if he said no, if he went on, how could he *not* die? What other escape could there be? In frustration, in bewilderment, Liam waited head down to hear the Hefn's third suggestion.

Humphrey said: "I can remove your memories of Jeff."

Liam's head jerked up. *"What?"*

"Remove your memories. Wipe your mind." And when the boy still stared at him: "You know, of course, what happened to your cousin's friend Jenny Flintoft, in England?"

Liam nodded. Jenny had seen a Hefn in Yorkshire, then been made to forget all about the encounter for years and years.

"And you also know, don't you, what happened to the Swede, Gunnar Lundqvist, who had forgotten some essential information relating to one of our exiles in Sweden? We looked into his mind and found his memories of the event in question. I imagine you have also heard about the Tanzanian farmers who destroyed several hectares of rainforest, and about the miners in Brazil. And I know you know what happened to Jeff's father, as a young man just a few years older than you. We Hefn can do these things with memory, Liam O'Hara—dig up events you've forgotten completely, bury others so deep you'll never get them back. We can do this, and we do do it, with or without the agreement and cooperation of the rememberer; but it's not my intention to remove your memories of your friend without your consent.

"However . . . if having them removed would make you able to continue living your life, and if you wish it, I can cover those memories so well you would never again remember that you knew a boy called Jeff Carpenter, if other people didn't tell you."

Liam felt spacy; he leaned on the bike to steady himself. Lose all his memories of Jeff, as if he had never known him? That would be to lose the most important thing in his life so far—and right away, without

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knowing how he knew, Liam realized he could decide to die more easily than he could ever consent to that.

But—lose them for a while? Till he grew up some more, got his life in some kind of order, formed some goals and made some other friends without the specter of Jeff standing always in between? *That* could be the biggest favor anybody had ever done him, an enormous time-release tranquilizer to help him through the next couple of years.

"You can still die if you like," Humphrey repeated placidly. "Or I suppose I should say, if you can."

Liam looked at Humphrey now, straight into the Hefn's large eyes surrounded by hair, like an animal's eyes, behind the faceplate of his helmet. It wasn't—he understood this now—it wasn't that he had ever *wanted* to die! If there turned out to be some other way of escaping the anguish of Jeff's death without dying himself, he would be glad enough to take it. He just hadn't imagined that there *was* any other way. All the same— "You could really dig the memories up again, when I was ready?"

"Certainly. Any time you say."

At that moment an image flashed into Liam's mind, a scene from one of the classic *Star Trek* episodes that he must have watched ten or twenty times with Jeff, who had been crazy about them. In this one, Captain Kirk had once again fallen in love with some space bimbo he had had to leave behind. At the end, Kirk had gone to sleep in his quarters, mumbling that if only he could forget . . . and Dr. McCoy had then seized the opportunity to treat Spock to one of his "humanism" lectures, saying how sorry he was for Spock because Spock, being unable to feel emotions, would never know the glories of love. "Really, doctor?" Spock had intoned. McCoy left the room. Spock leaned over the sleeping Kirk, arranged his long fingers about Kirk's head in a mini-version of the Vulcan mind meld, and murmured: "Forget."

This image of the Vulcan with his hand spread across Kirk's head, giving the lie to everything McCoy had said, was what flashed into Liam's mind. His last resistance collapsed. Sagging against the bike he said, "Could you do it now?"

"Now? Do you mean—right here?" And when Liam nodded, "Well—it *would* be considerably easier if we weren't both wearing these pestiferous coveralls. . . ."

"I want you to do it *now*," said Tim. "Unless it's impossible."

"Not impossible, just harder. Very well. I'll make a rough-and-ready job of it now, and do the more delicate work when we're back in Washington, where I'll have access to the equipment we used on old Lundqvist."

"I don't want to forget he ever existed," Liam said.

"You won't. You won't. You'll remember that you had a friend who

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died, and that the blanks in your memory represent thoughts about that friend, but the details will be unavailable until you want them again. Will that do?"

Liam laughed raggedly. "It's kind of like a lobotomy, isn't it?"

"Yes it is, in a way. But reversible."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not even a little, as Jenny Flintoft could tell you."

"When you said you wanted to understand the connection between us better—will wiping my mind help you do that? I mean, will you know everything *I* ever knew about Jeff, when you're done?"

Humphrey nodded, his helmet bobbing. "I can't explain the process so you would understand it, but yes, after I treat you in Washington I'll be in possession of whatever memories I will have removed—concealed, rather—from you. And I'll know a great deal more than I do now about human bonding."

Liam thought to himself, And a great deal more about human pain than you bargained for, I bet. "Okay," he said, biting down hard on his respirator mouthpiece, "let's get it over with. Where's the chopper? And then I guess you can take me home."

"By way of the Ragged Rock, I think," said Humphrey. "So we'll know how to find it again. When the time comes." ●

NEXT ISSUE

Isaac Asimov, the Good Doctor himself, is at the top of our bill of fare next month, delivering another one of his famous Robot stories, our powerful Mid-December cover story, "Kid Brother." Isaac's Robot stories are always thoughtful and thought-provoking, and this is one of his best, a wry and bittersweet study of the true meaning of family—and a surprising one it is, too! Recent Theodore Sturgeon Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** is also on hand for Mid-December, with Part One of a two-part serialization of his big new novel, *Stations of the Tide.* Readers who remember our serialization of Swanwick's popular novel *Vacuum Flowers* a couple of years ago realize what kind of treat they're in for. *Stations of the Tide* is every bit as fast-paced and pyrotechnic as *Vacuum Flowers,* and perhaps even more evocative and lushly inventive, as a harried and overworked bureaucrat from the Division of Technology Transfer heads for the mysterious planet Miranda, orbiting the distant star Prospero, on a desperate and possibly suicidal mission to track down the sinister renegade wizard Gregorian, who is hiding somewhere in the vastness of the Tidelands, before the Great Year turns, and the awesome Jubilee Tides thunder south to drown the world.... Hard-edged and exotic, full of terror and high-technology, mystery and magic, this is sure to be one of the most prominent novels of the year; don't miss an advance look at it here, starting next month.

(For more on our jam-packed Mid-December issue turn to p190.)

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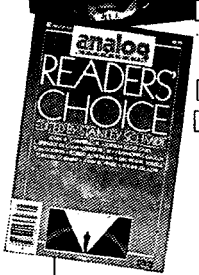

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Film Future

Voyage to the Red Planet
By Terry Bisson
William Morrow, $16.95

One has learned to expect the unexpected from Terry Bisson. His *Talking Man* was as much about automotives as it was about magic, and *Fire On the Mountain* was an alternate history out of left field. We're given a clue in the deliberately retro title of *Voyage to the Red Planet* that this one is going to be peculiar, too, and it is. (There probably wasn't a forties juvenile called *Voyage to the Red Planet*, but there were enough variations on that theme to make it a cliché nonetheless.)

So what is it? Well, it's just what it sounds like—almost. It's a meticulously done look at the first humanned voyage to Mars, practically Heinleinian in its attention to technical and engineering detail but totally updated. This is in itself something of a novelty. Science fiction authors have for several decades been so absorbed in the far reaches of time and space that almost nothing has been done on the near reaches, as it were, and so much has changed and been learned since the *verismo* early efforts of Clarke and RAH *re*space travel that it's become a whole new ball game. And Bisson honors the classic form—there's even the inevitable final crisis with takeoff and return involving—how'd you guess? —shortage of fuel. (There's also the sort of classic surprise which Clarke and Heinlein would sneak in.)

But Bisson has put a spin on the socioeconomic aspects of this near future, and there's the gimmick. The first expedition to Mars is financed by a movie company, and the personnel are a movie crew. This sounds like one of those boringly satirical notions that keep being made into novels and never quite come off, but by golly, Bisson makes it convincing. National governments (especially ours) in the next century have become so poverty stricken and debt ridden that almost all aspects of what we regard as governmental (the armed forces, the mail, the parks department) have been sold to the corporate private sector. A Mars vessel had been built, but never used because of the general economic collapse; a hotshot producer has the idea of buying it and producing a movie on Mars. Two aging astronauts (one male American, one female Russian) are brought (and bought) out of retirement, and

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they're off! Not, of course, without all sorts of complications, including the running gag that their "Mission Design" (read Mission Control) is a company in the private sector which goes bankrupt during the flight (they keep having problems with the phone hookups, not to mention the operators' bafflement at the thirty-minute delay) and is thereafter run by one guy when he can get time on the computer of the company he takes a job with.

One of the truly funny moments in the novel comes just as they touch down on Mars; an AT&T operator comes on the radio with a collect call from Mission Design—will they accept the charges?

So here we have a many-faceted novel—a first-trip-to-Mars story with all the modern conveniences and some surprises, along with a satirical view of a futuristic laissez-faire capitalism (not to mention the movie industry) which manages to be funny while not laying on its message with a trowel. What more do you want?

Film Past

Celluloid Gangs

By Tom Tolnay
Walker, $17.95

Tom Tolnay's *Celluloid Gangs* is being sold as a mystery, though it's as much of or more of a fantasy (but couldn't be marketed as such because it doesn't have dragons, elves, or wizards—so tightly are we now pigeonholed in the marketplace). The hero is a nerdish native of the South Bronx, a born loser who is working as a reporter on a supermarket scandal rag. By accident, he is among the first on the scene of the murder of a Golden Age Hollywood producer, and though he's almost immediately thrown out by the police, he's soon kidnaped by a lush female in a vintage limo with a sinister chauffeur. He's taken to a Long Island estate where he's interviewed by an even more sinister fat man, and learns that he's suspected of having made off with the one print of an unreleased forties film which is now of enormous value to a great many people.

But he soon realizes that the gang that's kidnaped him consists of Sydney Greenstreet, Erich von Stroheim, and Linda Darnell, and in the helter skelter chase that follows—to Hollywood and back—all sorts of other defunct stars become involved (Wayne, Gable, Crawford, Monroe, Chaplin, et al.). Seems that their "images" linger on in a manner similar to classic ghosts.

This could be a funny, intriguing idea. Unfortunately Tolnay makes it neither convincing nor funny (it has to be the first to be the second). He has a real tin ear—none of his stars talk at all like their legendary selves. (He does strive mightily and a bit more successfully to get a sort of Chandleresque prose style—"Her purple eyes seemed on the verge of a bright idea.")

What's worse, this is the sloppiest bit of nostalgia I've ever come across. Obviously, when dealing with this kind of specialized inter-

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est, a writer has to be real careful; his/her readers are often going to know as much as s/he does. And sure, it's easy to pick nits; as a sometime writer in this general area, I know too well how easy it is to slip up on a fact or two, and how infuriatingly smug a critic can be when citing these slips. But *Celluloid Gangs* just has too many, and I must non-smugly note that: the great von Stroheim's first name is spelled Erich, and his accent never sounded anything like "How long 'go you gif feelm to Gaple?"; no Studebakers or, indeed, any other model cars were made in the early forties (WWII, don't you know); Bob Hope's theme song is "Thanks for the *Memory*" (singular); and Judy Garland's favorite tipple was supposedly Blue Nun, not Four Roses. And finally, the author's depiction of a (modern) Academy Awards ceremony rings so false that one wonders how long it's been since he's seen one.

Opaque Alien

Illegal Alien
by James Luceno
Del Rey, $3.95 (paper)

James Luceno's *Illegal Alien* is another of those novels about which I've been complaining lately, that simply don't bother to give the reader initial information essential to understanding or enjoying the story. I can see this becoming an *idée fixe* in this column, but as the problem seems to be proliferating, I'll keep nattering about it.

Illegal Alien opens at a reception of some sort on an alien planet—a civilized alien planet—and the reader is immediately bombarded with any number of names, of characters and races, as well as mention of various events and much use of futuristic jargon. All credit to the author for having created such a complex milieu, but since almost none of it is explained, it is almost meaningless to the hapless reader.

You *do* get the idea that the protagonist is an agent of some sort for humanity, masquerading as a representative of the DisneyCorp, and that there's been a war. There's a bomb explosion which doesn't mean much since there's little to go on as to why it happened. Ah ha! On page 40, we actually get a little exposition. Of course, by this time the average reader, mystified and impatient at not knowing what's going on, has long since given up. Who *does* persist in beating his way through these obscure openings? Search me. I guess it's the same kind of mentality that sits through certain current movies that have done away with any kind of exposition entirely, and just watches the pictures go by—if it's got a fight or a car chase every few minutes, the mentality seems to be happy.

The difference is, of course, that SF novels have content; in many cases, not uninteresting content. If you *have* persisted long enough to get some exposition, you find that the conscientious reader (and/or reviewer) most then go back and

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skim what s/he's already read to put it into the context of what's been learned. *Oh, so that's what that was all about. . .*

Once you've gone to all the trouble of sorting things out and continue reading, the content of *Illegal Alien* is not dumb. It's a twist-and-turn espionage thriller mostly taking place in an alien culture in which communication is imparted as much by scent and touch as it is by sight and sound. Data is obtained from emitted odors and secretions of all sorts, as well as pats on the back, handshakes, and testicle squeezes. And the big problem seems to be Earth's cultural impact on the aliens' biorhythmically regulated sensuality. In other words, human ways are mucking up the native sexuality. But Luceno does keep things pretty opaque, and even when you've more or less figured out the big picture (about page 75, I'd say), there are times when more information clearly presented would help a lot.

Resoled Slipper

Spell Bound
By Ru Emerson
Ace, $3.50 (paper)

First one thing, then another begins to penetrate your consciousness as you get into Ru Emerson's *Spell Bound*. You realize almost immediately that you are not in a fantasy world, but in a slightly altered bit of history, so close to ours as not even to be called an alternate world. It's the seventeenth century, and it takes place in one of those innumerable little statelets of the period which would eventually become Germany. This one is called Saxe-Baden, and it never existed. This is the first major difference. The second is that magic is an accepted fact of life, though not necessarily a major factor in most folks' existence. The "green witches" of the people are folk practitioners; the "gold magic" of the upper classes is like expensive surgery. The two are considered mutually incompatible, and it simply isn't done to practice both. There's a fair amount of prejudice against witches. The other major use for magic seems to be in munitions—the army has ordnance sorcerers who work the cannon.

The opening chapter gives us a young Green Witch who is studying the forbidden gold magic, much to the dismay of her witch mother. Rumors of this transgression have leaked out, and the mother is burned instead of the daughter, who swears vengeance and death on the king and his armsmaster, present and partially responsible for the burning.

Then there's a sort of *entr'acte*, a letter written by the Dowager Queen—the king has indeed died and she is expecting the heir, Prince Conrad, home soon from Paris where he has been receiving an education with her family (she is French royalty). She confides in the letter (to a girlhood chum) that according to the terms of the king's will, the prince must marry a girl of Saxe-Baden, and she knows just

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the one—the daughter of the arms-master, also dead from the witch's curse. Unfortunately, the girl, Sophie, is having a hard time with her vindictive, social-climber stepmother, not to mention her two cloddish stepsisters. But she (the Queen) is going to give a ball the night that the prince returns. . . .

You got it, folks. It's *Cinderella.* The good news is that it's quite cleverly retold. The people are bright, and the girl has one hell of a fairy godmother, who is, of course, the vengeful witch, out for more revenge and using Cind—er, Sophie to get it. The ball is particularly effective, since it ends with the ballroom being totally demolished in a fire which breaks out at midnight. The bad news is that despite the cleverness, there's still a feeling of padding; the not-very-complicated story is filled out with smart detail, but not much substance, and there are several too many characters. Did we need a court astrologer *and* a court wizard, too?

Lives: Nine

The Lives of Christopher Chant
By Diana Wynne Jones
Knopf Bullseye, $3.50 (paper)

Down at the bottom of Diana Wynne Jones' odd and convoluted fantasies is usually a perfectly ordinary idea, wildly camouflaged by Ms. Jones' Byzantine imagination and style. *The Lives of Christopher Chant* (a prequel to *Charmed Life,* published a year or so ago, but only now in paperback) is no exception; it's merely the story of the son who does not want to carry on the family tradition. This tale is being given the genre twist that magic is the tradition Christopher Chant doesn't want to continue, but that's not all that original, either. After Ms. Jones gets through with it, however. . . .

All we know originally is that Christopher, at an early age, discovers he can walk out of his bedroom at night into a place he dubs The Place Between, which leads to all sorts of odd locales that he explores with pleasure, encountering things such as women with fish's tails. His daylight, "real" world is a sort of turn-of-the-century Britain; only slowly do we learn that this is an alternate Earth based on magic, which is a legitimate field of endeavor.

The enchantment establishment, which has its ties to government, considers Christopher's family rather tacky. Christopher's father is bankrupt and his mother is a contemptible social climber, and they ignore Christopher as hopelessly untalented.

It's only after a fair number of complications that we realize that Christopher is one of those rarest of individuals, a human with nine lives. The various alternate worlds come in "series" (Christopher's is one of a set with ours) and the nine-lived persons are those whose alternate-world equivalents have all been born in one basket, as it were. (It's those various sets of worlds that Christopher has been visiting

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at night.) This makes him one of the most potentially powerful people in any world and a possible future Chrestomanci (top magician of the age), but only his mother's sinister brother realizes this, and on the pretext of running experiments, has Christopher smuggling things from the other worlds such as dragon's blood and mermaid parts.

Things get very complicated indeed (Jones' books are supposedly "young adult," but there aren't that many books for *old* adults that are this complex). There are several amusing subplots, such as the one about the Goddess of one world who helps Christopher in exchange for books (she's bored) and, as a result, aspires to go to an English public school. The whole thing ends up in the malign world of Series 11, the only one which has no alternates. Diana Wynne Jones has come up with another wonderful, off-the-wall fantasy.

Found World

The Lost World
Arthur Conan Doyle
Academy Chicago Publishers,
$4.95 (paper)

Due to circumstances beyond my control, I'm going to indulge myself, the circumstances being simply a drought in the field of science fiction. Admittedly, I don't see *everything* that's published and therefore could have missed a few things, but judging by the large amount I *do* see, there's a huge lack of interesting SF being released. Almost everything these days is either a sequel to a sequel of a sequel, or part seventeen of the ongoing cycle of . . . , or an execution by Z of an idea by Y from an outline by X based on the classic story by W from an offhand remark by V. And all too many *original* novels prove to be unreadable after fifty pages due to a current disinterest on the part of young authors in telling the reader what's going on (see various complaints in recent *On Books*).

So I've reviewed what I can find that's readable, perhaps missed some good stuff by chance, and, to fill in my SF quota (self-imposed), am left to note happily the republication of one of the first great works of science fiction, and to ask bluntly, "How long since you're read *The Lost World?*" If the answer is "Not for years," or even worse, "Never," you have a treat in store. It is, of course, one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest, exercises in paleontological speculation as to the survival of dinosaurs in some remote, cut-off corner of the globe. Written by the creator of Sherlock Holmes, it was published in 1912, and is, in essence, the epitome of the let's-make-an-expedition novel.

Two movies have been made from it. The first, in 1925, was a sensation because of its realistic (for the time) dinosaurs; the second made a hash of the whole thing. Both movies, of course, had to include a female. The novel is a triumph of male supremacy; all

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four members of the expedition are men. (Not too unlikely for the time, but we still mustn't condone it, of course.) Doyle rubs it in with an opening piece of doggerel ("I have wrought my simple plan/If I give one hour of joy/To the boy who's half a man/Or the man who's half a boy."). In other words, this is what used to be called pure boy's adventure stuff.

Despite that (we daren't say because of it), it holds up wonderfully. What stuck me on reading it again this time (the umpteenth) is simply how enjoyable it is. The plot, by today's standards, is about as simple-minded as you can get. But the *writing*—ah, there we get down to it. The telling is intelligent, well paced and, above all, witty. (Particularly hilarious is Doyle's account of the scientific lecture which, in essence, spawns the expedition—it's a glorious description of the scientific community of the period, from students to superstars, and how it behaved.) This standard adventure is made into an experience that's both wondrous and humorous, and it would be a literary snob of the first rank that wouldn't respond to its charm.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Robot Visions* by Isaac Asimov, Roc/NAL, $18.95; *Invasions: Isaac Asimov's Wonderful Worlds of Science Fiction # 10* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg & Charles G. Waugh (Roc, $4.95, paper). ●

(From page 182)

ALSO IN MID-DECEMBER: Popular new writer **Allen Steele** spins the wry and funny tale of a Big Name science fiction writer Gone Bad, in "Hapgood's Hoax"; prolific new British writer **Ian MacLeod** (we already have several more of his stories in inventory) makes his *IAsfm* debut with a sad and lyrical fantasy unlike any you've ever read before, in the haunting "Green"; recent Nebula Award-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** returns with a razor-edged shocker about those who busy themselves exploring the "Realm of the Senses"; new writer **Karen Haber** makes her *IAsfm* debut with a compelling look at just *how* far some people will go to get a good apartment, in "3 RMS, Good View"; new writer **Deborah Wessell** returns to show us how sometimes You Just Have To Make Up Your Mind, in an elegant little story called "Time Considered as a Helix of Lavender Ribbon"; and new writer **Tony Daniel** (another of these prolific types; we have several more by him in store for upcoming months, too) makes his *IAsfm* fiction debut with a wise, eloquent, and lyrical story of a boy trembling on the awkward brink of becoming a man, in "The Passage of Night Trains." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our Mid-December issue on sale on your newsstands on November 13, 1990.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The Armistice (Veterans) Day weekend is big for cons in Europe, especially the UK. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. Early evening is usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and say what it's for). Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.

OCTOBER 1990

19–21—**NecronomiCon.** For info, write: **Box 2076, Riverview FL 33596.** Or call **(813) 677-6347** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Tampa FL (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests include: Jack C. Haldeman II, Lawrence Watt-Evans, Timothy Zahn, R. L. Byers, R. L. Newman.

19–21—**ConClave. (313) 449-5461.** Days Hotel, Southfield MI. Stan Schmidt, Bill Higgins, B. Gehm.

19–21—**Invention.** Sheraton, Racine WI. Esther M. Friesner. A "SERious & CONstructive" con.

19–21—**ConStellation. (205) 882-1006.** Sheraton, Huntsville AL. L. M. Bujold, Cherryh, Tom Kidd.

19–21—**NotJustAnotherCon. (413) 545-1924.** Campus Center Hotel, U. of Mass., Amherst MA. Clement.

26–28—**MileHiCon. (303) 936-4092.** Denver CO. One of the oldest cons away from the coasts.

26–28—**DreamCon. (206) 481-0153 or 488-1034.** Everett WA. Artists Steve Perry and Dameon Willich.

26–28—**ConCert. (031) 337-2052 or (041) 558-2862.** Edinburgh UK. Diana Wynne Jones, Neil Gaiman.

NOVEMBER 1990

2–4—**SoonerCon, Box 1701, Bethany OK 73008. (405) 321-3452.** Bujold, A. Austin, Wu, Satterfield.

2–4—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670. (804) 595-9005 days, 868-6160 eves.** Artist Bob Eggleton.

2–4—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest, Box 211101, Upper Arlington OH 43221. (614) 451-3154.** SF folksinging.

2–4—**World Fantasy Con, Box 423, Oak Forest IL 60452.** Probably sold out at this late date.

8–11—**Polish National Con, % Warminski Klub Fantastyki, ul. Kossaka 22, 10-349 Olsztyn, Poland.**

9–11—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 283-0802.** Howard Waldrop. Major northwest con.

9–11—**NovaCon, % Bernie Evans, 7 Grove Ave., Acocks Green, Birmingham B27 7UY, UK.** Jack Cohen.

9–11—**ArmadaCon, % Cornell, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead, Plymouth PL3 UK. 5HL, (075) 226-7873.**

16–18—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. (215) 342-1672.** Fritz Leiber, Frank K.-Freas.

16–18—**The Leonard Nimoy Con, % Davies, 77 The Ridings, Ealing, London W5 3DP, UK (01) 997-7755.**

AUGUST 1991

29–Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $95 to 12/31/90.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3–7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** WorldCon. $75 to 3/31/91.

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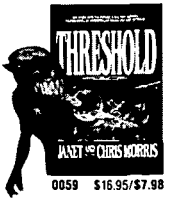

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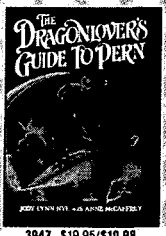

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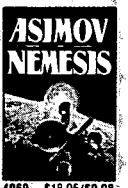

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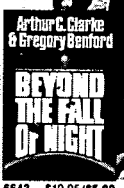

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